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IS LOVE A MOCKERY? OR, REVENGE IS SWEET.

BY ARABELLA SOUTHWORTH,

AUTHOR OF "A DESPERATE VENTURE," ETC., ETC.



"DICK, DICK, YOU HAVE KILLED HIM!"

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OR,

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CHAPTER I.

A HASTY DEED.

By the long, narrow window of one of the turret chambers of Thornhill House stood the Hon. Charles Wheeler, gazing dreamily out on his vast possessions.

The spreading gardens; the long sweep of avenue, fringed with stately elms; the path, which seemed gradually to merge into a forest; the fields of waving corn; the meadows and pasture land—all belonged to him; and yet, not one single acre had he inherited from his father.

As a poor man, without money, interest, or connections, he had started in life, and toiled bravely and steadily up the steep ascent to wealth and fame, until he had succeeded in reaching the summit. He was the owner of one of the largest rent-rolls and finest estates in the county.

At the last election he had been almost unanimously elected as member of the House and no one could venture to say that the distinction was undeserved.

It seemed as though fortune had withheld from him no gift which it was in her power to bestow, and that no wish of his heart was left ungratified.

His social position was well established; his wife was an aristocrat's daughter; his children were growing up to be all that a father could desire; his cares were few; his health was perfect; and yet, as he stood by the window on that glorious summer day, there was a heavy cloud on his brow, and a wistful, troubled look in his eyes.

He was thinking of the days long, long ago, when he and his little sister Lizzie were children together in their humble village home; how he used to talk to her of his determination to work, and push, and struggle until he became a rich man; and then how he would buy a beautiful house, with gardens and green-houses, carriages and horses, and have her there to live with him; how he would have liveried servants to wait on her, and give her dresses of silk and velvet to wear.

All this had proved to be no castle in the air; but Lizzie, his only sister—what of her, and where was she now?

He did not now, perhaps might never, know. That was not his fault, he told himself. She had deserted him—not he her, and all for the sake of Evan Taylor, the grocer's son.

Evan had been their playmate and constant companion in those bygone times, and even as a boy he had loved Lizzie Wheeler. Then came the time when every one spoke of Charles as decidedly a rising young man.

His remarkable talents for business developed rapidly. He was made a junior partner in the firm by which he was employed in the city. He went to live in a more fashionable neighborhood, taking Lizzie with him as his housekeeper.

Their parents were dead. They were alone in the world, and loved each other very dearly; but in the girl's heart her brother held only the second place; for the first was occupied by the dark-eyed, handsome Evan Taylor.

Charles did all in his power to induce her to give him up, but in vain; and when Evan's father died, leaving him his store and a few hundred dollars, he and Lizzie were married.

After that, all communication ceased between brother and sister. He loved her still, and in time might have relented; but when the

daughter of a wealthy house consented to be his wife, overlooking his humble origin on account of his wealth, he felt that he could not possibly give publicity to his relationship with the grocer's wife.

And as she sunk down in the social scale, he rose higher and higher.

His marriage, though based on mercenary and interested motives, proved a very happy one. Between the rush of pleasure and business his youthful days were almost forgotten, and the remembrance of his sister rarely intruded itself on his mind; but to-day his thoughts had left their usual channels, and had wandered back to the sister of whom for nearly twenty years he had heard no tidings whatever.

While the master of Thornhill House mused thus, a lad, some seventeen or eighteen years old, was walking slowly through the grove beyond the lawn, following the narrow pathway which led along beside the stream, and wound with it in and out among the spreading trees.

He did not look like one whom the world had used well. There was a sullen, dogged expression on his face, the features of which were, on the whole, good, though the brows were heavy, and the eyes much too near each other.

Unmistakable poverty was stamped on his entire appearance; his clothes, of the coarsest description, were soiled, faded, and torn too in many places; his boots were in little better condition; and his hat, of black felt, was covered with a thick coating of dust.

There was an air of intense languor and weariness about him, as he moved slowly along; and no wonder, for, within the last few days, he had walked all the way from Philadelphia to Thornhill, a distance somewhat over eighty miles.

A couple of quarters was all the money he had had with him to buy the necessary food; his last remaining cents had been spent in the village a couple of hours before on a loaf of bread, part of which he had eaten at the time, while the rest was still in his pocket.

"That must be the house!" he exclaimed half aloud, as a sudden opening in the trees disclosed a glimpse of a stately mansion, which stood on the side of a hill a little way in front of him.

For several minutes he stood gazing at it, wondering at its size and beauty; for, though he had been told that Thornhill House was a magnificent edifice, the reality far surpassed his anticipations.

"So that is his home!" he thought, bitterly. "He lives there in luxury and splendor, while she died—of want, I might almost say, in a miserable city lodging-house. Am I to go there—I, just as I am now—and introduce myself to him as his nephew? Why, the servants would turn me from the door as a beggar!"

Ruefully he glanced down at his worn, travel-stained clothes and roughly mended boots, then, raising his head, gave another look at Thornhill House.

"I cannot possibly go there in the broad daylight," he said to himself. "I must wait until it gets a little dusk; perhaps I may not look quite so like a tramp then."

He flung himself down full length on the long, soft grass; took out the piece of bread he had in his pocket, and devoured it eagerly, finishing his frugal meal by a long draught of water from the stream. After that, he lay down again, crossed his arms under his head, and closed his eyes.

Any one chancing to pass, and seeing him thus, would have taken him for a tramp or a field-laborer, at the best, and certainly would have been surprised to learn that Harold Taylor was nephew to the Member of Congress, the man of fortune, property, and position, the Hon. Charles Wheeler.

It was not of his own free will that he was coming to make himself known to his wealthy relative, but in obedience to the last request which his dying mother had made him.

Harold was Lizzie Taylor's youngest son, and the only one of her children who had lived more than a few years.

The story of her married life was very sad.

The husband's business had not prospered with him; sickness came, and when, three or four years ago, he died, he had been able to make no provision whatever for his widow and son.

With difficulty Harold contrived to earn sufficient to provide them with the bare necessities of life, and now he found himself thrown on the world, his only possession of any value a small pocket-book, containing the certificate of his parents' marriage and his own birth, together with a letter from his mother to his uncle, imploring him to befriend her boy.

How would that letter be received? he wondered. What welcome might he hope to meet with that evening, when he should present himself before Charles Wheeler?

With shrinking dread he thought of the approaching interview, which appeared doubly formidable now that it was so near.

For over an hour he lay in exactly the same position, the branches of the trees forming a green canopy over his head, the stream, swollen to an unusual size by the rain that had fallen a day or two before, rushing along beside him between its flower and fern-fringed banks.

Except for the monotonous flow of the stream and the song of the birds, all was still; and it seemed to the weary boy as though he had escaped from the noise and bustle of the world into a haven of rest and peace.

The bitter and envious thoughts which had filled his mind began to fade away, banished by the soothing influence of the calm around him.

The garish glare made his eyes ache no longer, only a soft green light reached him. The burning rays of the August sun no longer poured down on him, making his temples throb and burn. The air was cool and balmy; and the light breeze, which made the leaves sway and flutter like myriads of tiny fans, passed over his fevered brow with a deliciously refreshing breath.

All at once he raised his head and looked around, more from instinct than from being startled by any actual sound.

Standing at the opposite side of the stream was a young girl in a white dress, beautifully embroidered, and blue ribbons tying back her golden curls. There was no danger of the sun being able to mar the beauty of her skin, for she wore a shady straw hat, and her tiny hands were carefully gloved.

Wondering very much what the little lady could be doing there all alone, Harold watched her, and saw how she looked up and down the stream, and then placed her foot on the first of the stepping-stones which led across it just there. But the water was evidently much deeper than usual. Many of the stones were almost covered, while others had been entirely swept away by the flood; and with a look of fear and perplexity she shrunk back, not daring to venture.

Though Harold Taylor had been born and brought up in the city, he was light and agile. A step or two on the larger stones, a couple of springs where there was nothing on which he could rest his feet, and he was at the other side of the stream.

"You want to get across, don't you?" he said to the child.

She looked at him from head to foot, and he felt decidedly uncomfortable under the inspection.

"Yes, I do," she answered, curtly.

"Perhaps I can help you."

"I don't think you can," was the not very encouraging reply, as she gave him another look.

Harold laughed, but rather uneasily; and said, "You are such a little bit of a thing, I could carry you over quite easily."

Her cheeks crimson with anger, she sprung back.

"Don't touch me!" she cried, passionately. "Go away, can't you?"

"I'm not going to harm you. I only said I could lift you over," Harold said, sheepishly.

"Come little missie! you may as well let me." And he held out his hands toward her again.

"Don't! How dare you?" she screamed, stamping her foot. "Go away this moment! You sha'n't stop here!"

"I say, what's all this about?"

The speaker was a lad something about Harold's age, or perhaps a year younger, tall and slight, with hair and eyes very like the girl's, though a few shades darker.

"What's the matter, Lestlie?" he asked again, as neither answered.

"He wanted to carry me; that shabby, common boy!" said his sister, for such the likeness between the two proclaimed them to be.

And as she spoke she took up her position beside him, gazing all the while defiantly at Harold, who said, sullenly, "She wished to cross the stream, and I offered to carry her over. I only did it out of kindness."

"And why would you not let him, Lestlie? He was very good-natured, I think, and you certainly had no right to be so angry."

"He's so common, and his hands are dirty," was the disdainful reply.

Her brother laughed, took some money from his pocket, and threw it at Harold's feet.

"There, take that, and be off," he said, with haughty condescension. "It was kind of you, I suppose; but a fellow like you should know his place better than to press his services on a young lady."

Harold picked up the coins and flung them one after another into the water. His cheeks were white with rage, but on his forehead there was a damp, red flush.

His eyes were glittering like coals of fire, and his voice trembled with fury as he exclaimed:

"You had better not give me any more of that insolence, young sir. And it seems to me that it is you who require a lesson in good manners, and not I."

"What! This to me—to Charles Wheeler's son?"

"Charles Wheeler's son! You!"

He spoke in pained surprise; but the other mistaking it for incredulity, exclaimed, hotly:

"Yes, you young clown. And if you want to know my name it is Richard Wheeler. And now begone, I say, or it will be worse for you. This is my father's property and you have no business to be trespassing here."

"I shall stay here as long as I please. If you think I am going away at your bidding you are greatly mistaken."

"Then take that for your insolence!"

He had a light cane in his hand, and it fell with a sharp blow across Harold's shoulders.

There was a moment's pause, and then the two closed in fierce, desperate struggle, while Lestlie, greatly frightened, gazed silently on.

In physical strength the combatants were pretty nearly equal, for Harold, though the older and more powerfully built of the two, was worn out by his journey and weakened by want of sufficient food. But all the passions of his revengeful, vindictive nature were roused, and he strove to parry his adversary's blows, and return them with tenfold interest.

Blindly and furiously he struck out at him, while Richard, who had had the advantage of some years' training at an athletic school, economized his strength, and watching his opportunity, suddenly dealt him a blow between the eyes, which felled him to the ground.

"Dick, Dick, you have killed him!" screamed Lestlie, when she saw the fall.

"Killed him? What nonsense," answered Richard, giving his prostrate foe a contemptuous kick. "But I rather think I have given the young hound a lesson he won't forget in a hurry. Come home now, Lestlie; and remember this is the last time I mean to take you out into the woods with me, unless you promise never to stray off in that way again. Supposing I hadn't chanced to find you just now, what do you think would have become of you?"

He caught up the sobbing child in his arms, crossed the stream with her, and then bidding her not to make such a baby of herself, set her on the ground, took her hand, and walked with her toward the house.

The retreating figures were scarcely out of sight when Harold sat up, and gazed round him with dazed looks; but soon he remembered all that had passed.

"He my cousin, my uncle's son!" he muttered. "And am I to go to his father's house and beg for charity there? Never! And, Richard Wheeler, if either you or your sister ever cross my path again, you shall have reason to rue this day's work—ay, that you shall!"

In less than an hour, Richard, having left his sister safely at home, returned to the stream; his mind was by no means at rest, and he feared that he might have done the stranger some serious injury.

"Gone away; can't be much hurt, and I must say I am heartily glad of it!" he said to himself as he saw that his foe had disappeared; but on the ground at his feet was a sharp, pointed stone, against which Harold's head must have struck in falling, and on it was a stain of blood.

A kick sent it into the water, and Richard went away, whistling a lively air. That day's adventure made little or no impression on his mind. But in the memory of Harold Taylor it dwelt like some foul, tainted spot, to prove a fester, and rankle until it had changed the whole tenor of his future life.

CHAPTER II.

THE TURN OF FORTUNE'S WHEEL.

THIRTEEN years had gone by since that August afternoon, the sultry breath of summer was passing over the land again, and was sending people in crowds to the sea-side.

Oceanville, as was usually the case during the boating and bathing season, was crowded. Most people who lived within a reasonable distance generally found it a very pleasant and convenient summer resort, for the houses were both cheap and good and the market well supplied. There was a railway station close at hand, and the country round was admirably adapted for excursions of all kinds.

An intensely warm August afternoon was wearing slowly on; the heat inland must almost have been unendurable, for even at Oceanville there was scarcely a breath of cool air to be had. A thunderstorm was gathering along the horizon; the very sea seemed to have lost its life and freshness; every movement that one made was a wearying exertion; every time that one breathed it was as though a draught of tepid water had been swallowed.

The broad piazza in front of the Mansion House was about as cool a place as could be found under the circumstances—the hotel, a large three-storied building, sheltering it completely from the rays of the sun; and in front, within a stone's throw, divided from it only by the beach drive and a low cliff wall, lay the sea of deepest, richest blue.

On the piazza nearly all the inmates of the hotel were assembled. There were plenty of children, of course, and several ladies, some making believe to read or work, others honestly doing nothing; a few elderly gentlemen perusing the newspapers or talking politics; a good many younger men, for the most part smoking, save those who were in attendance on the ladies, and these, having nothing to hold between their lips, parted them very often to yawn. In fact, nearly every one was yawning that afternoon, and every one looked hot, tired, and rather bored too.

At one end, slightly apart from all the others, three gentlemen were lounging, conversing languidly at intervals, and sending thick clouds of cigar-smoke into the heated air.

"Going to Mrs. Bonar's to-night, Cennick?" inquired Captain Hammond, a handsome but rather conceited-looking young graduate of West Point.

Luke Cennick, the man addressed, was rather a contrast to Hammond; not nearly so good-looking, his face was a far more pleasing one, for it was a countenance which, despite its plainness, one could not help liking and trusting. His thoughts appeared to be far away just then, and he did not even look round as he answered Captain Hammond's question.

"I must go, I suppose. Wish I could keep away. Dancing this weather is anything but a pleasure."

"The fair Laura is to be there."

Luke Cennick gave Captain Hammond a broad, questioning stare.

"Certainly, Miss Russel is going," he said.

"And, consequently, you cannot but enjoy yourself."

"Miss Russel's being there will contribute as little to my enjoyment as my presence will to hers," Luke Cennick answered.

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed little Doctor Milman, the third of the party, with such sudden energy that several people looked round wondering what could be the sentiment so vigorously applauded.

"I only wish Miss Laura could have heard you, Cennick," laughed the captain. "We all know that she looks on you as the chief among her admirers, and that she bestows very special marks of favor on you."

"I beg your pardon, but she does no such thing. And, Hammond, I would feel greatly obliged to you to choose another subject for such remarks," retorted Luke.

Before the captain had time to make any rejoinder, Doctor Milman started to his feet, exclaiming, "By Jove! there's Miss Wheeler coming down the beach! Has she come out in the hopes of getting a sunstroke, I wonder?"

Three pair of eyes were instantly directed toward the tall, erect figure, which, like a black shadow on the white road was coming quickly toward them.

She passed the hotel without once looking up, and presently disappeared round a turn in the road.

"She must be going to the post. I saw a bundle of letters in her hand," Captain Hammond said. "Rather she had to go down to the village this afternoon than I."

Meanwhile Luke Cennick quickly left his place, and turned toward the large open door which led into the hall of the hotel.

"Going in, Cennick?" inquired the doctor.

"Yes," he answered, shortly.

"Dare say he has business at the post-office as well as Miss Wheeler," remarked Captain Hammond; and the meaning laugh which accompanied his words implied a great deal.

"So you think that there is something in the wind there, do you?" asked Doctor Milman.

His companion nodded, and leisurely began to prepare a fresh cigar.

"I may be mistaken," he said, "but I've seen him two or three times lately making himself uncommonly agreeable to her, and Mrs. Russel and Laura looking anything but pleased. Laura considers him as her own special property. I don't think I ever saw a girl make a more determined set at a fellow she is doing."

"I would give a great deal to see her disappointed!" exclaimed Doctor Milman, vehemently. "And if Cennick ever marries any one, I hope with all my heart it may be Lestlie Wheeler!"

"Lestlie Wheeler! May I make so bold as to ask who Lestlie Wheeler is?"

The two gentlemen looked up in some surprise, and saw that a stranger had approached them without their having been aware of his presence. He was not very tall, but was broad-shouldered and powerfully built, with large hands and feet, and heavy, rugged features. His eyes and hair were dark, his beard and mustache thick and black, and his skin like a Spaniard's, so tanned was it by exposure to the sun. He was wiry, well-dressed, but his clothes had about them an indescribable air of oppressive newness; he wore as a breast-

pin a diamond of the purest water; his watch-chain was of massive gold, and on each of his hands he had two or three rings.

It was Captain Hammond who answered his question.

"Miss Lestlie Wheeler"—and he laid marked emphasis on the word miss—"is a niece of Mrs. Sarah Russel's. The young lady passed the hotel a few minutes ago; I dare say you saw her."

"I didn't ask whose niece she was. I want to know whether her father was the Hon. Charles Wheeler, of Thornhill," he said, as with his foot he hooked toward him the chair left vacant by Luke Cennick, and sat down on it.

"I believe so," Captain Hammond answered, haughtily; and unwilling to submit to any more questioning, he stood up and sauntered off to the other end of the piazza.

"May be he is going to the post too," said the stranger. "Miss Wheeler will have quite a big escort presently."

"Miss Wheeler seems to interest you greatly," said Doctor Milman, who being rather at a loss to know how to pass the time for the next hour or so, was not by any means unwilling to continue the conversation.

"She does interest me greatly," was the reply. "I know something about her, and would feel greatly obliged to any one who could tell me more."

"I can oblige you, then," said the loquacious little doctor. "Her father was Charles Wheeler a self-made man, but enormously rich. He and his wife died within a few weeks of each other about a year and a half ago, leaving two children, a son and a daughter; Lestlie, the girl you were asking about, and Richard—but you know all that, I suppose?"

"I have heard it; but go on, please; I would like very much to hear your version of their history."

"Well, after Mr. Wheeler's death, his wife's sister, Mrs. Sarah Russel, swooped down at once on Lestlie. Her darling niece must come to live with her; she would love her just like a daughter, and all that kind of stuff."

"Because the girl had a good fortune, I suppose?"

"Exactly. That woman would sell body and soul for money, I believe; and she is rather badly off, so of course it would have been a great matter to her to have had the handling of some of her niece's cash. But very soon it appeared that Richard Wheeler had been speculating pretty considerably during his father's lifetime, though of course without his knowledge. He was left his sister's uncontrolled guardian, and when the crash came, not only lost everything he had himself, but every penny of her fortune as well!"

"Pleasant for Mrs. Russel," remarked the stranger. "Did she love her niece as dearly as ever, after that?"

"Not quite, I should say, though she makes a great fuss about her love for her and how kind she has been. You see, she could not well turn her out after having adopted her as she did. But 'tis pretty well known how much this pretense of affection is worth, and she makes her a sort of unpaid governess and general drudge. Poor girl, I'm afraid her life is anything but a happy one."

"Has this Mrs. Russel many children?"

"Two. Annie, the young monkey Lestlie has to teach; and Laura, the eldest, considered quite a beauty here, but a young lady whom I for one can't admire much."

"Now tell me about Richard Wheeler."

And as the stranger spoke he threw back his head, looked the doctor full in the face for a moment, and then covering his eyes with his hand, sat still and listened.

"Poor Dick!" sighed Doctor Milman; "he was almost mad with despair when he found out what he had done. But just about that time people were running wild about the diamond fields, and he took it into his head that he had nothing to do but go off there and fetch home as much money as he had lost. But instead of

coming back a rich man, he died out there of fever, poor fellow."

"Died out there, did he? Well, better men than Richard Wheeler have fared just the same! And when did the news reach the United States?"

"Some time in the spring through a cousin whom he had stumbled on accidentally, and who wrote an account of his death to the sister. And they say that this same cousin has been wonderfully successful in the diamond fields, and that he is shortly coming back to this country quite a millionaire."

The stranger uncovered his eyes and raised his head again.

"Not quite a millionaire, my friend," he said; "but with as large a fortune as Charles Wheeler ever had, and without a scamp of a son to spend it for him."

Doctor Milman looked at him sharply.

"I half suspected it!" he said. "You must be Mr. Taylor, the cousin."

"What! are you really?" exclaimed Captain Hammond, who, having come toward them again, had caught the last couple of sentences.

"Yes, gentlemen; I am Harold Taylor, at your service."

"Allow me to congratulate you on your good fortune," Doctor Milman said, heartily.

"Dear me, what a strange thing luck is! You are a lucky man, if ever there was one, Mr. Taylor!"

"Thank you; and I must say that I am vastly obliged to you for what you just told me about my cousin, Miss Wheeler, and her aunt. I had little or no idea what sort of people they were."

"I should have thought young Wheeler would have told you all about them."

"Not he. Besides, I knew very little of him."

"But did he never speak to you of his sister?"

"No. How do you suppose he'd care to talk about her, after having made ducks and drakes of every penny she was worth?"

"He laid down his life trying to repair that wrong, Mr. Taylor."

"And much good it did her!" was the almost brutal rejoinder.

His hearers wondered at the tone, and still more at his look.

"Was it his fault that his noble self-sacrifice was all in vain?" the doctor asked, reproachfully, and almost sternly.

Blacker and blacker grew the cloud on Harold Taylor's brow; some muttered words escaped his lips; nor were Doctor Milman and his companion far out when they fancied that among them was a curse such as few men would care to utter aloud.

CHAPTER III.

A CRUEL POSITION.

DOCTOR MILMAN disliked Mrs. Russel extremely, and often said very hard things about her; but, on the whole, the description which he had given to Harold Taylor was not incorrect.

Money was the god which she worshiped. Money, not to count and hoard as the miser does, but because of the good things of this life which by its means may be procured.

Essentially a shrewd, calculating woman of the world, she seldom or ever gave others credit for motives save such as she herself could understand.

Judging every one else by her own standard, generosity and integrity were to her mind only meaningless words.

Never was Mrs. Russel so thoroughly in her element as when working out some deep-laid plot. Occasionally, however, that plot was laid a little too deeply, and in the end she succeeded only in overreaching herself.

Her marriage was the greatest mistake of her life, for deceived by the reputation of vast wealth borne by Gilbert Russel, she had become his wife after an acquaintanceship of scarcely more than a few weeks, hurrying on

the wedding lest he should have time to discover that her own expectations were far from being so brilliant as she had led him to believe they were.

Mutually deceived, without the slightest love for each other, utterly unsuited in temper and disposition, they dragged on a miserable existence together until his death, which, greatly to her relief, took place after a few years.

After that, with rather a narrow income, she had contrived to keep up a very respectable appearance, living in a small but well-appointed house in West Philadelphia, and generally passing the summer months at Oceanville or some other inexpensive seaside place.

When Lestlie Wheeler's parents died, fortune, Mrs. Russel told herself, had at last smiled on her, and great her mortification when she discovered that in her hurry to constitute herself her niece's protector, she had burdened herself with the maintenance of a penniless girl.

But there was no help for it; and she saw at once how the world would comment on her conduct were she to make any open complaint.

She never in so many words threw her poverty in Lestlie's teeth; never, in public at least, spoke hardly or unkindly to her; but there was a chilling politeness in her manner, and in a thousand little ways she made the girl feel her dependent position.

She did not ask her to take charge of her daughter Annie's education, but had so contrived that Lestlie herself should offer to teach her.

The greater part of the mending and making done in the house was accomplished by Lestlie's hands, though she had never been told that she was required to do such work.

If one bedroom was more uncomfortable than another, Lestlie had it; if a drive was planned, and there was not room for every one to go, Lestlie remained at home.

Her deep mourning, of course, was sufficient reason for her non-appearance in society, but even such invitations as she could quite well have attended, were invariably refused for her.

Lestlie, it was said, did not care about meeting strangers; she preferred remaining at home, and so was rarely, if ever, included in any pleasure excursions.

Very dull, dreary, and miserable indeed was the poor girl's life; but until the news of her brother's death reached her there was something to hope for, something to look forward to, for was not the time coming when he would return home again?—whether rich or poor she hardly cared, so long as they could be together.

How deep her grief for that brother was! What bitter self-reproach was contained in the thought that on her account alone he had gone to meet his death no one knew or suspected.

Quietly and uncomplainingly she went through her daily routine of work—growing paler and more worn, it is true, but giving no other sign that she was suffering.

Annie Russel, the youngest daughter, was spending a few weeks with friends just then. All the more reason, therefore, why Lestlie should have plenty of time to render her aunt and Laura the many little services which they were constantly expecting from her.

It was no unusual thing, no matter how hot the day, to send her on messages to the village. But on this particular afternoon they certainly would have hesitated about doing so could they have foreseen what was going to happen, for scarcely had she left the hotel a hundred yards behind her when Luke Cennick was by her side.

"Miss Lestlie," he said, eagerly, "this is a piece of good fortune for me indeed."

The sun, hot though it was, had never made her cheeks burn as they did now at the sound of his voice. Her heart was beating wildly as her hand was cordially grasped by his.

"You are on your way to the village," he said. "May I walk there with you?"

"Oh, yes, you may." Her tone showed plainly how willingly she gave the permission he asked for.

Two years before Luke Cennick had known Lestlie Wheeler as a wealthy heiress—courted, flattered, and admired. He was one of the many who had offered her homage; and, in the flush of youth, pride, and beauty, she had turned coldly from him as from many another, and yet her thoughts had dwelt on him far oftener than on any of her other admirers.

Of love he had never actually spoken to her. It was her own fault that he had not done so—that she knew full well, for he was not the man to offer his heart to be spurned at a woman's caprice.

Then trouble, poverty, and desolation came, and she discovered, when too late, that she had thoughtlessly and heedlessly put from her what might have been a life-long happiness.

It was under very different circumstances that they met again.

No man in Oceanville was more popular than Luke Cennick. The owner of a large and unincumbered estate, he was the prize which many a mother would fain have secured for one of her girls; and more than that, he was the man whom Sarah Russel had resolved her daughter Laura should marry.

For some time past the probability of such a marriage had been pretty freely discussed in Oceanville, and Lestlie was trying hard to reconcile herself to the thought that she was forgotten—that another had taken the place which she had once held in his heart. His name was constantly on the lips of her aunt and cousin, and Laura made no secret of the fact that she was daily expecting to receive an offer from him.

Any encouragement which she could possibly give she gave him, but at the same time Lestlie could not but feel how that on more than one occasion lately it was her society, and not Laura's, that he seemed to prefer.

Friendship might have been his motive; it might have been only pity; Lestlie could not tell. She only knew that she loved him, and that she was completely at his mercy now.

Resolutely she strove to shut her eyes to that fact, and it was no use.

"He is Laura's lover; what right have I to think of him at all?" she would say to herself, over and over again.

Laura's lover! Yes, that he might be; but the thought would have been far less painful, far less bitter, but for the conviction that if ever Laura married him love would be the least of her motives.

She was miserable; and yet as he walked along beside her to day it seemed as though a breath of happiness had been wafted down from her old life, and pleasure and pain were so strangely mingled that it would have been impossible to distinguish one from the other.

Later on it would be all pain. What matter? The joy of the moment is none the less sweet on account of the sting it will surely leave behind.

Sitting together in the cool, shady drawing-room, Mrs. Russel and Laura saw Lestlie returning from her errand, accompanied by Luke Cennick. They saw, too, how he parted from her at the gate of the little inclosure in front of the house, and turned quickly away, though he could not possibly have failed to see them, for each sash of the bay window was thrown wide open, and their figures were tolerably conspicuous from without.

"What do you think of that, mamma?" asked Laura.

Mrs. Russel did not say what she thought, but her angry look answered the question plainly enough.

"I told you how it would be from the very first," Laura continued, crossly. "I can't see the slightest reason why you should keep that girl here any longer, after the way she has been acting lately."

"People would make unpleasant remarks if I were to turn her out of my house; besides, she really makes herself very useful," answered her mother, who saw no practicable means of getting rid of Lestlie just at present, and who was not unmindful of the fact that

she did the work of a governess at a very cheap rate.

"Useful?" re-echoed Laura, scornfully. "Oh, yes; of course she can be sent on all kinds of messages, which one of the servants could do just as well. And then she can walk about the place with the man who she knows perfectly well is paying me attention. That is carrying her usefulness a little too far, in my opinion. She can bring Annie up a mean, deceitful flirt, like herself, and you will not find out your mistake until the mischief is done!"

As she spoke her voice rose higher and higher, and before she had reached the end of her sentence, Lestlie was standing in the doorway, having heard every word.

Though a humble dependent on her relation's bounty, Lestlie Wheeler's pride was by no means dead. Never had the girl's temper been more thoroughly aroused than at that moment, and coming slowly toward her cousin, her head erect, her eyes flashing, she demanded: "What right have you to speak about me like that, Laura? How dare you call me a mean, deceitful flirt?"

"I have a right to say what I please, particularly when I have such good proof!" retorted Laura. "And if I choose to tell you that you are doing all in your power to come between me and Mr. Cennick, can you deny it?"

"I do deny it!" Leslie answered.

But at the mention of Luke Cennick's name her eyes fell beneath Laura's penetrating gaze, and the color came and went in her face.

"Really? I sincerely hope you are speaking the truth," said her aunt, in hard, measured tones. "I have been intending to speak to you on that subject for some days past, and I really must tell you what I think of your conduct now. Your efforts to attract Mr. Cennick's attentions are, I might almost say, disgusting. The way in which you look at him, and color up when he speaks to you, or when any one chances to make any allusion to him, makes me feel thoroughly ashamed for you! And then to-day I was more than surprised to see you walking with him in full view of all these houses. Where did you overtake him, may I ask?"

"He overtook me near the hotel, and asked if he might come with me," Lestlie answered hotly. "It surely is no great crime for a lady to let a gentleman walk a few hundred yards with her?"

"It entirely depends on the circumstances; and believe me, Mr. Cennick would never have dreamed of doing so if you had not let him see how much you prized his society. Do not flatter yourself that you have the faintest chance of entrapping him, or inducing him to give up Laura for you. Every one sees how much he likes and admires her; and even if he did not, a man in his position would hardly stoop to marry a girl dependent on the bounty of others."

"Aunt!" commenced Lestlie, feeling that she must defend herself, but scarcely knowing how to do so.

Mrs. Russel, however, had no wish to listen to any explanation, and cut her short at once.

"No more discussion, if you please!" she said, coldly; "and if you take my advice you will spend half an hour or so in your own room, and when your passion has had time to cool you will, I am sure, understand how very foolish you have been."

Only too glad to escape, Lestlie was in the act of leaving the room, when a visitor, whose arrival none of them had noticed, appeared at the door.

"Mr. Taylor!" announced the servant who had admitted him.

With a quick glance Harold Taylor took in the appearance of each of the three occupants of the room.

Mrs. Russel, with her haughty features, proud bearing, and the remains of past beauty of no mean order; Laura, very like her mother in figure and features—a strikingly handsome girl—with good eyes, rich, dark hair,

and white, strong-looking teeth, which she showed almost to a fault. Lestlie, in her dress of somber black, the tears glittering on her long lashes, her face all aflame with passion and resentment, looking marvelously like the little lady who, when last he had seen her, had called him a common, vulgar boy, and dared him to touch her. He had come suddenly in on some family altercation—it needed but little observation to make that clear to him; and recalling what Doctor Milman had just been telling him, he rightly enough concluded that some vials of wrath had been poured out on Lestlie's head.

His name was no strange one to Mrs. Russel. Of late she had thought of him a good deal, and frequently speculated as to what sort of man he would prove himself to be. She saw at once that he was not belonging to her world; but conscious that he was possessed of the more substantial nobility bestowed by wealth, she advanced to meet him with a gracious smile, held out her jeweled hand, and said, cordially:

"We are most happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Taylor. Lestlie, dear, come and speak to your cousin. Allow me to introduce you to my daughter, Laura."

The remembrance of her brother whom she had lost, who had died in making atonement for the injury he had done her, rushed over Lestlie's mind.

Silently she gave her hand to the man who had watched by him in his last moments. Then, with a burst of weeping which she no longer had the power to control, rushed from the room.

Harold Taylor stood silently looking after her. Thoughts of the past came crowding in on him, too; but, rousing himself by an effort, he said:

"I hope you will excuse me for calling without having asked permission; but I was anxious to see my cousin, Miss Wheeler."

"There is no need whatever to make any excuses," answered Mrs. Russel, with more than usual suavity, taking note as she spoke of the clumsy way in which her visitor disembarassed himself of his hat and cane, and how awkwardly he held his hands. However, knowing that in Oceanville, at least, his wealth would introduce him to the best society, she thought it well not to be backward in bidding him welcome to her house. "You are my dear Lestlie's cousin," she continued; "that alone makes me heartily glad to see you here. Poor girl! meeting you so suddenly rather unnerved her. You must not be offended with her, or mistake her emotion for a display of any unfriendly feelings."

"Oh, certainly not!" answered he, thinking all the while what a hypocrite Mrs. Russel must be.

And so she was, in truth. Moreover, she fancied that by always speaking of Lestlie in the most affectionate terms she could deceive the world in general, and lead every one to suppose that she was the kindest and most sympathetic of relatives. But it was no easy task to throw dust into Harold Taylor's eyes, and she did not impose on him in the least. Still, knowing that she had it in her power to prove an invaluable friend to him, he pretended to believe everything she said, being resolved to do all he possibly could to win her over to his interests.

He listened quietly to the many affectionate speeches which she made about Lestlie, and then, with a candor partly natural, partly affected, began to tell her of his early life, making no effort whatever to disguise how low his origin had been.

From him she learned much more of his mother's history than she had known before; but of his abortive journey to Thornhill House he said nothing, and touched very lightly on the years passed at the diamond fields, and his meeting there with Richard Wheeler. He was profuse in his expressions of gratitude to her for her kindness to Lestlie; and then, with some awkwardness and hesitation, said:

"Mrs. Russel, there's something on my mind, though I am almost afraid you will be angry with me for saying it. You see, I am Lestlie's relation almost as much as you are, and it doesn't seem quite fair that you should have all the expense of keeping her. Will you let me give a trifle toward it—say, five hundred a year? I will look on it as the greatest possible favor you could show me, if you don't object."

Mrs. Russel drew a long breath, and did not answer for a few moments.

An addition of five hundred a year to her income would be an inestimable boon. And there could be no possible degradation in her accepting it, since Lestlie, and not she herself, would be the acknowledged recipient.

There was a quick glance between her and her daughter. She saw that Laura for one would not make any objection; the vision of a new ball dress and a set of turquoise ornaments, on which she had set her heart, floated before that young lady's eyes as her mother answered, slowly, "Your offer is a most generous one, Mr. Taylor, and I really think I will accept it. I am not ashamed to acknowledge that I am far from rich, and having another to feed and clothe in addition to my own family is, of course, rather a drain. But I must ask you to let this business be a strictly private one; it would be hardly pleasant for Lestlie or for me to have it spoken about."

"There will be no need whatever to talk about it," answered Harold.

And he thanked her warmly, and arranged that the first installment should be paid next day.

"Laura, will you see whether Lestlie feels equal to seeing her cousin yet," Mrs. Russel said, presently; then, turning to Harold, added: "And we will say good-by to you for the present, Mr. Taylor. My daughter and I have one or two visits to pay this afternoon; besides, I am sure that poor Lestlie would far rather have you all to herself to-day."

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNPLEASANT INTERVIEW.

HER aunt's summons had the effect of bringing Lestlie almost immediately to the drawing-room.

Rarely had Harold Taylor felt less at his ease than when the pale, sad-faced girl came into the room, and with a very palpable effort to speak calmly and steadily, said:

"It was very kind indeed of you to come to see me; and I must thank you for your letter, too; but for it I might never have known what had become of my poor brother."

She sat down, striving to conceal the tears that would not be kept back.

"Would you mind telling me all that you can remember about him?" she said. "I want so much to know everything."

The same expression which had been noticed about half an hour before by Doctor Milman and Captain Hammond passed over Harold's face, and he said, shortly:

"I have little or nothing to tell. I knew hardly anything about your brother; it was only quite at the end that we came at all in contact."

"So you said in your letter."

"I know I did; and having read that letter you know about as much as I do."

"It was very strange that you should have met him at all, Mr. Taylor, the cousin whom you had never even seen."

There was a scar on Harold's forehead, left there by the cut he had received when flung to the ground by Richard Wheeler's powerful young arm; he passed his hand across the place, smiled bitterly, and said, "Many strange things have happened in this life, and I can remind you of a few. Was it not strange that your father should let his only sister, my unfortunate mother, die in want and poverty? Could the wealth, one fraction of which he would not offer to save her life, be expected to prosper with him or with his children? No;

his children reaped the harvest which he sowed; one died as Lizzie Taylor died, a homeless pauper; the other is doing what her son never stooped to do—living on her relations, and eating the bread of charity!"

Lestlie dashed the tears from her eyes, and looked up at him.

"If you have only come to taunt and mock me, you had better have kept away!" she cried, passionately. "I thought my cousin was going to be my friend."

"And perhaps share some of his earnings with you? A little money would be acceptable to you now, I dare say. And you shall have it, too, if you want it. I am willing to help you as your father never offered to help me."

"Do you mean to tell me that you have the presumption to suppose I would degrade myself by accepting your bounty?" exclaimed Lestlie in rising anger.

"You might just as well accept it from your father's nephew as from your mother's sister," he said, quietly.

"Mr. Taylor, leave the house instantly!"

She rose and stood before him, every muscle of her face quivering with passion. The tall, slender figure seemed to grow taller still, the tears in her eyes changed to fire, and the blue veins on her temples grew strongly visible through her pure white skin.

"Are you going? Did you not hear?" she demanded, as Harold sat watching her, without showing the slightest sign of moving.

"Yes, I heard you," he answered; "and I am going presently; but there is something I want to say to you first. I have just been telling your aunt that it is my intention to allow her five hundred dollars a year toward your support. She accepted my offer, and right gladly, too, I can tell you."

"Mr. Taylor, not one penny of your money shall ever be spent on me, and I look on that offer as an unpardonable insult."

"Really! How proud and independent we are!" and he laughed long and loudly. "Come, Lestlie," he continued, standing up and laying his hand on her arm, "remember that I am your cousin—one of your nearest relations. I am rich, you are poor, and if I choose to give you some of what I don't want, you may as well take it, and say thank you."

"Let me go!" she commanded, trying to wrench away her arm from his grasp.

But his hand, accustomed as it was to wield the spade and ax, held her as in a vise, and no effort of hers could shake it off until he chose to release her.

"Let me go this instant!" she commanded again. "How dare you touch me?"

"How dare I? I can dare a good deal, as you will find by-and-by. And now farewell, my fair cousin. Remember, my purse is at your disposal whenever you wish to make any calls on it."

He released her hand, and left her.

Panting, breathless, indignant, she dashed up-stairs to her own room, locked the door, and flung herself sobbing on her bed.

She knew of no reason why he should have spoken as he did, and her mind was in far too great a turmoil to understand his motives, but she felt that from henceforth she could never regard him but with hatred which would not be unmixed with fear.

Before very long she heard Mrs. Russel's step on the landing outside her door, and, still boiling over with anger and resentment, went at once to her.

"Aunt Sarah," she asked, "did Mr. Taylor offer you money for me?"

"Yes, I am thankful to say, he did," her aunt replied. "He has shown himself generous and considerate, and has expressed a wish to settle a certain sum yearly on you."

"I do not wish him to do anything of the kind, aunt."

"And why not, pray?"

"I do not wish it—I will not have it!"

"Did you tell him so?"

"I did."

"Then I must say you have been extremely foolish."

"No, aunt. That man heaped insult after insult on me, and then had the insolence to offer me money!"

"Insult after insult! That is rather strong language, Lestlie. Come into my room, and explain exactly what you mean!"

Poor Lestlie's task was becoming a very hard one. She knew that she was about to engage in a battle with her aunt, and her chance of victory was not only uncertain, but almost hopeless.

"Now begin at the beginning, and tell me what he said to you, and what his so-called insults were," Mrs. Russel said, in her calm, business-like tones.

"First of all, he said all the hard things he could about my father," Lestlie commenced.

"Who treated his mother shamefully," interrupted her aunt, "and it certainly is no wonder that he should feel very sore on that subject. Well, go on, Lestlie."

"He said that Dick died a pauper!" cried the girl, growing desperate; "and that I was living on charity!"

"Then of course you flew into a passion, as usual. I am afraid you will never learn to place any control on your temper."

"Can you blame me if I grew angry at that?"

"It was natural, I suppose. None of us like to hear disagreeable truths put in a disagreeable manner. And you quarreled with him then, I suppose?"

"I told him to go away."

"Polite of you, certainly. Your manners could not have been much better than his, which I must say might be considerably improved. And what did he do then?"

"He laughed at me."

"Well, such an exhibition of temper must have been rather entertaining. And when he had finished laughing, what happened?"

"He caught hold of my arm and told me that his purse was at my disposal, and then went away."

"And is that all?"

"All! Is it not enough?"

"Quite enough to show what an extremely silly girl you are. Here you are, without any fortune whatever, and you have a rich cousin whose mother your father treated vilely, and instead of bearing you any ill-will, he comes forward in the most generous manner to do for you what your father never thought of doing for him or his. You know, too, how very badly off I am, and what an expense you are to me; and instead of being grateful to Mr. Taylor and thankful for my sake, you call his kindness an insult, and treat him with rudeness and the grossest ingratitude."

"Aunt Sarah, I know perfectly well he did not mean it out of kindness," cried Lestlie, vehemently. "If he had, he never would have spoken as he did. Besides—"

"There, that will do, Lestlie," her aunt exclaimed, decidedly. "What other motive but kindness could he possibly have? I feel very sorry, indeed, that a niece of mine should have shown such an utter want of good breeding. It is a great trial to me that you should have inherited so much of your father's want of refinement and so little of his common sense. How can you ever expect to make or keep friends if you treat people as you treated Mr. Taylor to-day? If you would only be a little more polite to him and slightly less gushing to Mr. Cennick, it would be a decided improvement."

Lestlie clinched her teeth to keep back the angry retort which had almost escaped her, and silently left the room.

Night came, bringing with it the storm which had been threatening all day. Hour after hour Lestlie lay awake, listening to the roar of the thunder and the fierce dashing of the rain against her window, trying to find some way out of the labyrinth of difficulties which surrounded her, and resolving that, no matter what opposition she might meet with, she

would insist on leaving her aunt's house sooner than submit to the indignity which Harold Taylor was trying to thrust upon her. The idea of taking some situation where she could earn her own living was no new one to her, and more than once she had suggested it to her aunt, only to be told that such a thing was not to be thought of for a moment. Now, however, she firmly resolved that nothing should prevent her from carrying her project into execution, and that with as little delay as possible.

"I should have gone away long ago," she said to herself. "Any life would be better than the one I have led with her. Oh! I wish I could leave this place to-morrow, and never, never come back again! Then Laura could have Luke Cennick all to herself, and nothing more to fear from me."

And then before her mind there arose the picture of the gay scene in which Laura was at that moment partaking. Laura raising her lustrous eyes to Luke Cennick's face, giving him her sweetest smiles and softest accents; Laura, looking handsomer than ever, with the crimson flowers in her full, dark hair, the queen of the ball by reason of the admiration offered her by him.

A very sickness of misery was over her; a blank, a chaos of agony, a dull, dead hopelessness. Life, that had once looked so fair and joyous, was all darkness and desolation now. In the black clouds which hung around her there was not one bright spot; in the rugged path which her weary feet had to tread, not one smooth resting-place.

CHAPTER V.

FOR HER LOST LOVE.

THINKING quietly over her conversation with her niece, Mrs. Russel came to the conclusion not to press on her the subject of Harold Taylor's offer. It would, she argued, only serve to rouse in her the spirit of opposition, which she knew Lestlie to possess in no small degree, give rise to frequent altercations between them, and perhaps, in the end, drive her to open rebellion.

Harold's proposition had been to pay the money into her hands, and not into Lestlie's. What, then, was there to hinder her from taking it without the girl's knowledge, who, under these circumstances, would have no idea that she was one whit the less under the same obligation to her aunt than before?

Thus, by a little dexterous management, the wealthy cousin could be conciliated, and the five hundred a year secured; while the seeming compliance with Lestlie's wishes would render her all the more anxious to prove her gratitude by losing no opportunity of making herself of use.

She and Lestlie breakfasted together; Laura fatigued by the night's dancing, did not make her appearance until some time after the bell had rung.

At first, Lestlie was silent and constrained, feeling that she was in disgrace, and not knowing what tone her aunt would take with her; but Mrs. Russel's manner was much the same as usual, and perhaps a slight degree more cordial.

"I wonder whether we shall see your cousin to-day, Lestlie?" she said, as though making the most casual of observations.

"I sincerely hope not!" answered Lestlie.

"Something tells me that I shall like him very much," Mrs. Russel continued, not appearing to notice her niece's reply. "He is such an original!—so unlike any one we ever met before?"

"I told you yesterday what I thought of him, aunt; and have discovered no reason for changing my opinion since!"

"I trust these feelings will not last. Believe me, you do very wrong to encourage them. But as you have such a decided objection to accepting anything from him, we will say nothing more on the subject for the present."

A heavy weight seemed lifted from Lestlie's heart.

"Oh, aunt! I cannot tell you how much obliged I am!" she exclaimed, presently. "The idea of such a thing made me so miserable!"

"Then do not feel miserable any longer; but I repeat you are an extremely foolish girl, and you will agree with me in time. Money is not so plenty that people can afford to refuse it as you are doing."

Lestlie, speaking quickly and nervously, said: "Aunt, I have made up my mind not to be a burden to you any longer. I am going to take the first post as governess that I can hear of. It really is the best thing for me to do. Both you and Laura are tired of me, and I cannot bear to stay where I am not wanted."

"Lestlie, I request, as a special favor, that you will never allude to that mad project again! No niece of mine shall degrade herself by turning governess so long as I can prevent it! I have told you so more than once; and what is the use of making me say so again?"

"I supposed that you might have changed your mind since, aunt; and I would far rather work for my own support than remain with people who have no welcome for me!"

"How can you say that, Lestlie? You know perfectly well it is not true. Did I not tell you when your parents died that I wished you to look on my house as your home?"

"But I was rich then."

Mrs. Russel's brow darkened. "Really, Lestlie, I am at a loss to know how to deal with you! If my motives had been such as you insinuate, would I have given in to you now about Mr. Taylor, or oppose your becoming a governess?"

To this argument Lestlie had no answer, and her heart smote her as she recalled all her bitter thoughts about her aunt the night before.

Did it not seem now that she had been judging her far too hardly? What right had she to feel anything but gratitude toward her for renouncing so solid an advantage, to gratify what she evidently looked on as an absurd whim?

And yet there was a vague, uneasy feeling in her heart, a something which told her that she ought honestly and plainly acknowledge to her aunt how unhappy she had been under her roof, and that to remain there longer than was absolutely necessary she would not.

"And now have I set your mind at rest about my wishing to keep you with me?" asked Mrs. Russel. "Are you quite satisfied that I am not anxious to get rid of you?"

Longing for courage to say no, Lestlie answered yes, thus setting the final seal on her thralldom.

"I am heartily glad of it," said her aunt, with unaffected warmth; "and now my dear child, I want you to promise that in future you will treat your cousin more politely than you did yesterday."

"I will try to be polite to him as long as he leaves me in peace."

"Leaves you in peace! Do you suppose that it is his intention to persecute you?"

Lestlie hung her head, and did not answer for a moment, then said:

"And will you let him know what we have settled about?"

"About the money? Yes, certainly. He will probably call to-day or to-morrow, and I will tell him in as friendly a manner as possible."

Nothing more was said, for just then Laura came into the room.

Looking rather fagged and sleepy, she took her place at the breakfast-table, having wished her mother and cousin a somewhat languid "Good-morning."

"Did you enjoy yourself much last night, Laura?" Lestlie asked.

"Oh, yes, thanks; very much indeed!"

"You look rather tired."

"I am rather tired. I danced a great deal."

"And you had pleasant partners, I hope?" Mrs. Russel inquired, who, having secured the services of another chaperon for Laura, had declined Mrs. Bonar's invitation for herself.

"Tolerably," Laura answered; then she added, watching Lestlie closely as she spoke: "Mr. Cennick was decidedly the one that I preferred. He made me keep nearly all the waltzes for him, and as he was by far the best dancer in the room, that was rather a flattering compliment."

Laura's statement was rather an exaggeration. She had danced but twice with Luke Cennick.

Lestlie, however, did not know that, and a pang of jealous pain shot through her heart.

"Have you any plans for to-day?" asked Mrs. Russel.

"Not for the afternoon—it will probably be too hot to do much; but Mr. Cennick wants me to go out with him in his yacht for an hour or so in the evening. Mrs. Bonar and Captain Hammond are coming too."

Another look at Lestlie, who had her eye steadily fixed on her plate.

Notwithstanding Laura's declaration that she had enjoyed the ball so much, she was far from being in good spirits that morning. Restlessly she wandered from room to room, unable to fix her attention on work or books; giving short, petulant answers when spoken to; and having an uneasy, worried look, which pointed plainly to a mind ill at ease.

"I am tired—my head is aching," was the reason which she gave her mother when she inquired what was wrong.

"Then lie down for a couple of hours," Mrs. Russel said, "and try to get rid of those black rings round your eyes before this evening—they are far from becoming."

Early in the afternoon Harold Taylor called, and was received by Mrs. Russel alone. Their interview must have been highly satisfactory, to judge at least by the amiable smile with which she greeted Lestlie, who, in obedience to a message sent her, joined them in about half an hour.

Harold met her with the most respectful politeness. Not an allusion was made to the object of his visit; and Lestlie, remembering her aunt's injunction, did all in her power to give no sign of the aversion with which she regarded him.

Mrs. Russel's graciousness could not have been surpassed, and before he left he had been pressed to come often—very often—to her house.

He had accepted an invitation to spend the following evening there, and had promised to organize a series of picnics "for his and Lestlie's special benefit," she said.

Lestlie, meanwhile, sat silent, and listened, wondering how it would all end—how she would be able to endure constant contact with one to whom she had taken so sudden and unconquerable a dislike; wondering, too, how it was that her aunt, cold and proud as she was, could take such pains to please a man who was vulgar-looking, vulgar-mannered—rich indeed, but none the less an illiterate grocer's son.

As soon as Harold Taylor was gone, Mrs. Russel went up to her daughter's room. The door was not locked, and she turned the handle quietly and went noiselessly in.

Laura was not lying down, as she expected to find her, but was seated at a table in one corner of the room, an open writing-desk before her, and a number of letters lying scattered about.

It was not on one of the letters, however, that her eyes were fixed so intently, but on a photograph representing a handsome, manly visage—a face full of hope, life and energy, with eager, intelligent eyes, a high, broad forehead, and a proud, sensitive mouth. At a glance, Mrs. Russel recognized it. Richard Wheeler had been no stranger to her, and the time was when she had desired no more brilliant future for her daughter than to become his wife. But with the change in his prospects her wishes changed too. The master of Thornhill House and the fertile acres which surrounded it was one person—the ruined speculator quite another.

"Laura!" she said, sharply.

The girl started quickly, and pushed the photograph under some of the loose papers in her desk.

"What are you doing here?" asked her mother.

"Looking through some old letters."

"Whose letters?"

"Dick Wheeler's," she answered; and then, to her mother's utter amazement, buried her face in her hands and sobbed aloud.

"Laura, what can be the meaning of this? I cannot understand it," Mrs. Russel exclaimed.

Laura choked back her sobs, and began rapidly to gather up the scattered letters.

"You hardly expected to find me making such a fool of myself, mamma," she said bitterly, but with painfully quivering lips. "But I did care for Dick Wheeler very much; and I know that I shall never, like any one else half so well."

Mrs. Russel's thin lips closed so tightly that they looked only like a faint red line; then they parted again, and she asked, shortly, "And since when have you made that all important discovery?"

"I knew it from the beginning, mamma. And—and it was you who first made me think of liking him."

"How obedient you were!" sneered her mother. "What a pity that you were not equally so when I desired you to give him up!"

"And what a pity that your theory of our being able to give and take back love at pleasure does not always prove correct!" Laura answered.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Russel. "The idea of a young woman of two-and-twenty talking like a romantic school-girl of fifteen! And so you have been keeping up a clandestine correspondence with that young spendthrift—that worthless, unprincipled—"

"Hush, mamma—hush! Don't speak of him like that; I cannot bear it! There is nothing to be gained by saying hard things of him now. He is dead, poor fellow!"

"And society in general has not suffered a very great loss," supplemented her mother. "Now, if you please, I would like to know the full extent of this romantic folly. Does Lestlie know anything of it?"

"She knew that I was engaged to him once."

"Is that all?"

"Yes—all."

"Good!" answered Mrs. Russel.

But she would have been far less content had Laura confessed to her how, on the evening of the day that Richard Wheeler left America, she had flung her arms round Lestlie's neck, sobbing out:

"Oh, what shall I do if he never comes back? I love him so, Lestlie—oh, I love him so!"

That was the last confidence which had passed between the cousins; and as though resenting Lestlie's knowledge of her secret, Laura had ever since treated her with coldness and unkindness; often, as she listened to the flattering speeches of some admirer, almost hating her for looking at her with those reproachful eyes, so startlingly like her brother's.

And she hated her now, while telling her mother a direct falsehood when, in reply to her question, she answered, "Yes; all."

"And Mr. Taylor—I hope he never heard?" asked Mrs. Russel uneasily.

"I have no reason to suppose he did. But, mamma, at Mrs. Bonar's last night, everyone seemed to be talking about poor Dick. Mr. Taylor having come here must have put them in mind of him. Even where I was dancing I sometimes could hear his name distinctly. Oh, it was hard to look quite as if I did not care in the least! It seemed to bring back the whole past so plainly. I cannot help thinking of him for one moment!"

And the tears rushed into her eyes again.

"At all events, I am glad to hear you had

the good sense not to make a scene," Mrs. Russel said.

"A daughter of yours would hardly forget herself so far as to do that!" Laura answered, with much covert sarcasm in her tone.

"Hardly," her mother returned, coldly. "And since you loved this young man so devotedly, I presume you were engaged to him still up to the end. You will probably tell me next of your determination to remain single for his sake. I shall not be in the least surprised at anything I hear now. I only wish I had known a little sooner, and I would not have taken all the trouble I did to throw you and Mr. Connick together."

"I did not keep on the engagement!" cried Laura, as indignantly as though she had been accused of some heinous crime. "What harm can my liking him do any one? It certainly will not prevent my accepting Luke Connick, if Lestlie does not keep him from asking me to marry him. I would not acknowledge it to her, but he hardly came near me last night."

"Lestlie will not interfere with you now, I can answer for that," said Mrs. Russel.

CHAPTER VI.

HER SACRIFICE.

AT about six o'clock that same evening Luke Connick walked quickly up the hill toward Mrs. Russel's house. He had just called at Mrs. Bonar's and been told that she and Captain Hammond had gone for Miss Russel, leaving a message for him that if he went on to the place where the yacht was moored, they would follow him there. That message he had disregarded for reasons of his own, and was making what haste he could lest he should not reach the house before the party had started for the place of meeting.

"I mean to see her and make her come with us," he was saying to himself. "I will not go at all unless she does."

It was of Lestlie that he was thinking—Lestlie, so different from the bright, willful beauty whom he had once loved—loved still, and would love forever.

Some bantering remarks made in his hearing the day before had opened his eyes to the fact that rumor had begun to couple his name with that of Laura Russel.

Surprised and annoyed at first, a little consideration had shown him how much cause he had given for the reports which were afloat.

He really did like Laura, and when Lestlie was not present preferred her company to that of almost any other lady of his acquaintance.

He saw now that he had suffered this feeling to carry him far beyond the bounds of prudence.

He was not a vain man, but as a thousand little incidents which had happened of late occurred to his mind, a vague terror thrilled through him that while he merely looked on Laura as an agreeable friend, she might have been thinking of him as something more.

How often had he gone to the house in the hope of seeing Lestlie, but though disappointed by her non-appearance, had out-stayed the limits of any ordinary visit, talking to Laura! How many excursions he had planned, calculating on Lestlie's being of the party, and when she did not come had turned to Laura as a substitute!

At the ball last night he had felt in no humor to seek her society, and had held himself as much aloof as common courtesy would allow. But how strange it had seemed to him to do so, and he could not but note how her eyes followed him, as though in mute inquiry why he was not at her side; he noted, too, how wearied and harassed she looked as the night wore on, and once he heard how heavily she sighed as he passed close by her.

A sting of remorseful shame kept festering in his heart as he thought of these things, all unconscious as he was of the fact that while her hopes and wishes were centered in him, that sigh was breathed to the memory of her

lover, fever-stricken and dying beneath an African sun.

"I have been both mad and blind," he said to himself, as he strode along. "Heaven grant that it may not be too late to put an end to this horrible misunderstanding!"

Whether there was any hope of his being able to win Lestlie he did not know; but he was determined henceforth to let it be plainly seen that she, and she alone, was the attraction which brought him to Mrs. Russel's house.

When he entered the pretty flower-scented drawing-room, he was met by Laura with that look of glad, eager welcome which she always gave him now.

She and her mother were standing in the center of the room, talking to Mrs. Bonar and Captain Hammond; while, at some little distance, apparently unnoticed by all the rest, sat Lestlie, her head bent low over her work.

"I suppose you were afraid Miss Russel would not come unless you fetched her yourself," laughed Mrs. Bonar, the gay, dashing young wife of a retired merchant, a man old enough to be her father. "However, she is quite ready, you see. Shall we go at once now?"

Luke, however, appeared not to hear her, and crossed the room to where Lestlie sat.

"Are you not coming with us?" he asked. "We are going out in the Fairy Queen for a couple of hours."

She started, colored painfully, looked up for a moment, then her eyes fell again, and she answered shortly, "No!"

"Oh, yes, you must, Miss Wheeler. You cannot surely think of remaining indoors an evening like this. Get your hat at once. Please do."

Lestlie could not forbear one glance at the sunlit sea, dotted all over with little boats and yachts, with their white glistening sails; but, instead of moving, she shook her head and went on with her work.

Luke bent over her chair, and said again, "You must come, Miss Lestlie. I will take no refusal."

"Thank you, I would rather not," Lestlie answered, coldly and stiffly.

"I am not going unless you do," urged Luke.

"I cannot see why that should make any difference," was Lestlie's rejoinder, in the same chilling tones.

"What is the matter?" asked Mrs. Russel, coming toward them. "Do you know that they are waiting for you, Mr. Connick?"

"I am trying to persuade Miss Wheeler to join our party," Luke answered. "She has refused me, but perhaps if you will kindly use your influence, she may change her mind."

"Miss Wheeler would not refuse if she had the slightest wish to go," Mrs. Russel said coldly. "What would you like to do, Lestlie, dear? You have only to please yourself, you know."

"I am not going, aunt."

"How hard-hearted you are!" exclaimed Luke. "You know that I have pledged myself not to go without you, and I am longing for a sail this evening."

"I am sorry you have deprived yourself of that pleasure on my account, Mr. Connick. It was quite unnecessary."

"Then you still persist in remaining at home?"

"Certainly I do."

He turned on his heel, and rejoined the others.

There was a well-satisfied look on Mrs. Russel's face, which, however, quickly changed to extreme annoyance as she heard him say, "I regret very much that I must break my engagement with you, ladies; but Miss Wheeler will not come with us, and I have said that I would not go unless she did."

"How tiresome!" exclaimed Mrs. Bonar. "Oh, Mr. Connick, you can not possibly be serious?"

"Perfectly serious; but, of course, my yacht is at your disposal. Captain Hammond will be with you, and Ben Lockhart and the other men will take good care of you."

"Do you think I would trust myself to them if you were not there? Miss Wheeler, you really must come. Say you will; please do. I am sure you would enjoy it."

"Thank you, but I would rather not."

"Do you dislike yachting?"

Lestlie hesitated, and then answered, with perfect truth: "No."

"Then why will you not come?"

"Because I do not wish it."

"How disobliging!" muttered Laura, casting a wrathful look at Lestlie.

"Lestlie can be very self-willed if she pleases," Mrs. Russel said. "I think you had better arrange your plans without any reference to her."

"Let us go for a walk then," suggested Mrs. Bonar. "You have recorded no vow against that, Mr. Cennick, I suppose?"

"Not that I am aware of," he answered, stiffly.

"Let it be a walk, then. Of course, we can not ask for the pleasure of Miss Wheeler's company, for fear of another 'I would rather not!'"

Lestlie did not answer, neither did she look up. As they were leaving the room she bowed slightly in acknowledgment of Captain Hammond's "Good-evening, Miss Wheeler."

Neither Luke nor Mrs. Bonar spoke to her again.

"How very tiresome your cousin is!" said Mrs. Bonar to Laura, as they were leaving the house.

"Very!" rejoined Laura, inwardly rejoicing in the thought that Luke should have seen Lestlie in such an unamiable light; glad, too, that a walk had been substituted for the sail, calculating that since Captain Hammond would undoubtedly devote himself to Mrs. Bonar, she would enjoy a more complete monopoly of his society.

"Yes; she is often very tiresome," she added, addressing Mrs. Bonar, but meaning the remark to be heard by other ears.

"I am not in the least surprised at Miss Wheeler for being tiresome this evening," said Luke, quietly. "She probably did not care to join our party on my invitation alone."

"But I asked her too!" cried Mrs. Bonar.

"Oh, certainly you did," answered Luke; "and your invitation was quite a cordial one. Good-evening."

"Are you not coming with us?"

"No, thank you. Good-by."

And soon he left them, angry with himself, angry with Lestlie, angry with every one else; discontented, as people naturally are, who, having intended to act wisely and well, have only succeeded in making matters worse. He had suffered himself to drift with the current so long that he knew it would be no easy matter to turn back now, and his first effort had resulted in a signal failure.

Laura Russel did not enjoy her walk much that evening, nor did her presence by any means add to the pleasure of her companions.

Captain Hammond and Mrs. Bonar were such good friends that the gossips of Oceanville used to shake their heads meaningly when they spoke of them, and to form a third with such friends is rarely agreeable.

There was little affection in her nature, and that little had been all expended on Richard Wheeler; but dearer than love and faith, and sweeter far than the memory of the past, was her ambitious dream of reigning as mistress in the great halls of the stately mansion of which Luke Cennick was master.

Her jealous eye had long since discovered that he thought far more about Lestlie than of her, and that very knowledge made her all the more determined to have her way.

"She shall have a hard fight before she takes him from me," she said to herself, as she walked silently and moodily along the breezy beach. "It will be strange if mamma and I cannot conquer in the end."

Lestlie, meanwhile, was passing through one of the many wretched hours which formed so large a portion of her young life. She had

acted her part well. In anger she had driven him from her; he would hardly venture near her again, after the reception which she had accorded him that evening.

"Laura and aunt Sarah ought to be content now," she thought, bitterly. "I wonder whether they will accuse me again of trying to flirt with him?"

CHAPTER VII.

A FALSE RUMOR.

"I WILL see Lestlie to-day, and know my fate at once," Luke Cennick said to himself next morning. "I have waited too long as it is. If I had not been such a simpleton, I should have spoken to her weeks ago. I should have had a much better chance then than now. However, I am not going to lose any more time. Yes; I will go to her to-day."

But scarcely was his resolution formed, when he found that it would be out of the question to put it into execution, for the letter he was in the act of opening contained the news that a secretary in whom he had placed implicit but, as now appeared, unmerited confidence, had absconded, probably robbing him considerably. It was absolutely necessary for him to return home immediately, for without his presence on the spot it would be impossible to ascertain the full extent of the man's guilt, or to take the proper steps for tracking him and recovering any of the stolen property.

There was no help for it, he must leave at once, for there was but one train from Oceanville which would enable him to reach home within the day; and in order to be in time to catch that train he must be on his way to the station in less than half an hour.

So he had to leave the place without seeing her; and after the manner in which she had treated him the day before, he told himself that he could not venture to write—that his only chance would be to stand face to face with her, pleading his own cause, overcoming all her objections, explaining away any misunderstandings which had arisen, and resolutely persisting in taking no answer but the one he wished for.

He must wait; and by waiting, under the present circumstances, no very great harm could be done. In three or four days at the furthest he would be in Oceanville, and then would set himself to win the prize he so coveted. A few days was all he calculated on, but more than a month passed before he was at liberty to return. Over and over again he had said to himself, "To-morrow; I can go back to-morrow." But when the morrow came, some new difficulty arose—some new business that must of necessity be attended to; and thus, always hoping and always disappointed, the time passed on, and the month of September had almost run its course before the much wished-for day of release came.

Doctor Milman was one of the first persons whom he saw on leaving the train at the Oceanville Station; and Doctor Milman, hearty, talkative, and overflowing with gossip, as usual, came forward to welcome him back at once.

"Delighted to see you, old fellow—I really am!" he exclaimed. "We thought you were going to desert us altogether. You have been such an age away, and missed the pleasantest part of the season too, I can tell you! I never remember having had such a jolly time in Oceanville. By the way, have you heard the latest?"

"I have not heard a word of news since I went away," answered Luke, "so I must look to you to tell me everything. Just let me send an expressman up to the hotel with my things, and then we can walk there together."

Luke Cennick's baggage was collected and dispatched, and wondering whether he was going to hear anything that would interest him, he walked on beside the doctor.

There was a good deal to tell. There had been balls, dances, and picnics without number, one marriage, some engagements, and a long story of how Mr. Bonar had turned Captain

Hammond out of his house, and ordered him never to set foot inside his doors again.

To all this Luke listened, waiting with all the patience he could command for some account of the Russel party. It came at last.

"I expect Miss Laura has been wearing the willow for some one," Doctor Milman went on, furtively watching Luke as he spoke. "She goes out very little now, and when she does, hardly ever looks as if she were enjoying herself. Fancy, do you say? Oh, yes; of course it may be fancy; but others have made the same remark, I can tell you. And Lestlie Wheeler—well, I wonder whether you will believe me when I tell you what they say about her?"

"What do they say of her?" asked Luke, eagerly.

"This." And he spoke the words slowly, making a little pause after each. "They say she is engaged to be married to that underbred cousin of hers, Harold Taylor."

"Then they lie!"

"My dear fellow, how can you tell? He is as rich as Croesus; and nine girls out of ten are only too ready and willing to marry for money nowadays; though I must say I did not think Lestlie Wheeler was one of that sort. Anyhow, he is at her aunt's house day after day. He keeps his horses here and takes her out riding, and I hear Mrs. Russel is doing all in her power to make up the match. But I say, Cennick, where are you going? That is not the way to the hotel!"

Luke Cennick stood still, looked at his companion like a man in a dream, and said, "Don't mind me, Milman. You may as well go back to the hotel. I will follow you in a few minutes."

He strode up the hill, and Doctor Milman looked thoughtfully after him.

"I was afraid of it!" he muttered. "Poor fellow! he is rather hard hit, but he'll get over it in time; and, after all, he must be nothing short of a fool! If he wanted the girl, why didn't he ask her in time? She would not have said no, or my name isn't Philip Milman."

Luke Cennick's one thought was to see Lestlie, and see her he did.

Standing in the road, just in front of her aunt's house, her hand resting on the neck of as perfect a horse as any lady ever rode; a rich color, brought there by excitement and exercise, in her cheeks; her eyes raised to Harold Taylor's face, who, holding the bridle of his own horse, was standing before her.

They had evidently just returned from their ride; and when, in a minute or two, she went into the house, she did not shake hands with him, but parted from him as from one whom she was sure of meeting again that day.

Luke she did not see at all, and he was thankful for it. He could not have endured to have spoken to her just then.

Mrs. Russel soon heard of Luke Cennick's return, and forthwith she sent him a note containing a pressing invitation for that evening.

His first thought was to refuse; but the hope of being able to discover how much truth there was in what Doctor Milman had told him about Lestlie induced him to change his mind.

He could not bring himself to believe it, and yet the first person whom he met on entering the drawing-room was Harold Taylor.

It was Harold who sat next to her at table, Harold who insisted on her singing, and who turned over the pages of her music.

He constantly spoke to her, and referred to her as "Lestlie;" and Lestlie bore it all quietly, but whether willingly or unwillingly he could not decide.

With ever-increasing impatience, Luke watched for the moment when he could say a few words to her unheard by the rest; but fate seemed against him.

The time slipped by—in a few minutes he would have to say good-night—and he was beginning to fear that he would have to leave the house with his object unaccomplished.

Laura at the piano, dashing through a brilliant rondeau; Mrs. Russel and Harold Taylor engaged in a low-toned conversation; Lestlie seated in the deep bay-window, partly concealed by the blue chintz curtains.

The golden opportunity had come at last; and leaving his post beside the piano, he came over to her.

"Well, Miss Lestlie, how has the world been treating you since?" he asked, trying to speak lightly, and to conceal the eagerness which he felt.

"Since when?" asked Lestlie, looking up at him with an expression of calm inquiry.

Luke felt his cheeks grow warm.

"Since I saw you last," he answered.

"Counting the time by your absence, very well," she answered.

Luke stooped to pick up the broken petals of a rose which had fallen from her dress, and then sat down beside her.

"The world has been troubling itself a good deal about your affairs," he said, fixing his eyes searchingly on her.

"In what way?"

"By arranging a most brilliant marriage for you."

He saw how the blood rushed to her face, and then receded, leaving it as colorless as the white rose-leaves in his hand.

"Is it true?" he asked.

"No."

The word was not spoken above a whisper, but it was resolutely and firmly uttered.

"Then why should they say such a thing of you, Lestlie?"

She glanced round the room as a frightened animal might do to see whether there was any fear of its place of refuge being attacked; then she said, quickly and nervously:

"I never knew that such a thing was said; indeed I did not. But I was afraid of it; I was almost sure it would. It is not my fault; I cannot help it."

"If you do not wish it, why do you not prevent his being so much with you?"

"How can I? He is always coming here. Hush! Don't say anything more about him. He is watching us."

Luke followed the direction of her eyes.

Harold Taylor was watching them; so, too, was her aunt.

He knew full well that his moments alone with Lestlie were growing very few, and he said, eagerly:

"I could not rest until I knew whether it could be possible that they spoke the truth. Can you not guess why, Lestlie? Can you not understand how miserable I was about you?"

"Mr. Cennick," exclaimed Mrs. Russel, "Mr. Taylor wishes so much to get up a picnic to Long Beach! Come here, and let us talk it over. We want you to take us in your yacht."

In obedience to her call, he rose and joined her.

Lestlie slipped noiselessly away, and crept up to her own little silent chamber.

There, on her knees, the moonlight resting lovingly on her bowed head, she murmured over and over again, "Oh, heaven, I thank thee!"

CHAPTER VIII.

HAD HE A HEART?

"MR. TAYLOR wishes to see you for a few minutes. He hopes you will excuse his coming so early, but it is about business."

So spoke Mrs. Russel's trim waitress next morning before breakfast was much more than half over, and like a sudden shot the words struck into Lestlie's heart.

A great happiness was over the girl, as well as a great fear.

Her mind was burdened with many perplexing thoughts, and of every one of which Harold Taylor formed no small part.

Do what she would, try as she would, she was not able to keep him at a distance. No rebuffs, no coolness seemed to daunt him. His

conduct was a puzzle, and his manner intolerable.

It was not so on their first meeting; then he was polite and respectful.

He brought her presents, which, let her refuse them never so often, aided by her aunt, he always ended by forcing her to accept. If he wished to make her do anything, he invariably succeeded. If he asked her to ride with him, she had to go; to walk with him—it was just the same.

If she appealed to her aunt, she was merely reminded that he was her cousin, and that it would show a great want of good taste not to be on friendly terms with him.

Then came the rumor that they were likely to become more than friends to each other; but as rumor is generally long in reaching the ears of those most concerned, she had no certain knowledge of what was being said about her until she heard it from Luke Cennick the night before.

To hear such a thing, and from him—oh, horror!

But he did not, and would not believe it; and why need she trouble about it now? Did not Luke Cennick love her?—had she not heard almost as much from his own lips? To-day—yes, this very day—most certainly he would tell her the rest of the old, old story.

And it was of this old, old story that Lestlie Wheeler was thinking as her aunt went to find out what Harold Taylor's business was; and she was thinking of it still when, nearly an hour later, a messenger boy came up to the house with a letter in his hand.

She did not see him, but Mrs. Russel, coming out of the drawing-room, found Laura in the hall, and saw the boy turning away from the door.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Look," returned Laura, holding the letter so that she could read the address.

"For Lestlie?" said her mother.

"Yes; and from Luke Cennick," added Laura.

"Are you certain?"

"Perfectly. I know his handwriting as well as I know yours. Besides, the messenger said it was from him."

"Where is Lestlie, Laura?"

"In her room. I suppose I had better take her this precious epistle?"

"No; there is no need to give it to her yet. Go into the dining-room, Laura; I will be with you in a moment. I must send her to Mr. Taylor."

"What does Mr. Taylor want, mamma?"

"What I have been expecting for some time. He wishes to marry Lestlie."

"She won't have him."

"I think she will—that is, with a little management. There, take that letter, and wait for me in the dining-room."

"Mind, you are to give it into Miss Wheeler's own hands," Luke had said to the boy to whom he had intrusted his letter. "You are to ask to see her, and not let any one else have it. Remember, now."

"Yes, sir," the boy had said; and when Luke saw him next, and asked him whether he had given the letter to Miss Wheeler, he said again, "Yes, sir."

Tommy Peters, unfortunately, disliked trouble extremely, and had very little regard for the truth; but Luke Cennick did not know that Harold Taylor was sitting by a table in the center of the room when Lestlie came in, bending over a number of loose papers which were lying before him.

He stood up as she entered, and offered her his chair, but quickly gathered up the papers and laid them on one side.

"My aunt said that you wanted to see me Mr. Taylor," she murmured.

He always called her by her Christian name, but she still persisted in adhering to the more formal mode of address.

"Yes; there are a few documents here that I want you to look through with me—this, for instance."

With a puzzled look in her eyes, she glanced over the sheet of blue paper which he gave her. A printed name which she had never before heard of on the top, and that of her brother, in writing, under it; written in a mercantile hand at one side, columns of figures marked pounds, shillings, and pence at the other.

"It is a bill," she said, slowly.

"Yes," was the reply; "and here is another and another, and another! I have just been adding up the amount. It comes to between six and seven hundred pounds. Your brother has left a precious legacy of debts, I can tell you!"

That there were debts Lestlie knew quite well, for she remembered how, in the first days of her bitter grief for her brother's loss, bills came pouring in on her.

About the actual sums she had no clear recollection; but she knew that at the time they appeared mere trifles, and her aunt had said she could easily arrange about them.

"Don't you think those debts ought to be paid, Lestlie?"

"Of course they ought. But"—and the look of perplexity in her face increased—"I cannot understand about them, Mr. Taylor. My aunt told me at the time that she would settle them."

"A matter of some eight hundred! As if Mrs. Russel would pay that! Shall I tell you how she settled? She wrote to the creditors saying that there was no money to pay them. That was a very simple matter. But how do you suppose your brother's creditors liked it? Just think seriously for one moment how dishonest the whole proceeding was! See, here, for instance. This is a bill for gloves, and scarf, and perfumes, and such things. They were got at at a shop kept by an unfortunate widow, who has a young family to support. The bill is a small one; but that poor woman and her children may often be cold and hungry next winter for want of the thirty dollars that they have been cheated out of. Look at his jeweler's bill—it is over three hundred and fifty dollars! I see one item, ninety dollars, for a lady's gold watch. I expect it is the one you are wearing at this moment. What right had your brother to give it to you, and never pay for it, I should like to know? He has not paid his tailor, nor his wine merchant, nor plenty of others; he only gave them promises that he would do so when he came back, a rich man. There is a letter here from one man to say that he will probably be ruined unless he can get the money due him within the next week. Don't you think it a hard thing that he can't have his money?"

"It is dreadful!" cried Lestlie. "If it was only a small sum, I might manage. There is my watch—it must be nearly worth what it cost; and I have a few other things that I might sell—but only a few."

"Shall I pay those bills for you, Lestlie? I will if you wish it?"

"You?"

"Yes; I can easily do it. You must remember how I told you once that my purse was at your disposal whenever you chose to make any calls on it?"

Lestlie shuddered as she remembered the first day that she and her cousin had met.

"Well, shall I?"

"No!" she exclaimed. "I cannot put myself under such an obligation to you."

"It need be no obligation; for I have something to ask in return."

"What is that?"

"Your promise to be my wife!"

She shuddered again; but was neither surprised nor startled. From the moment he had offered to undertake the payment she had suspected. He wanted to take a mean advantage of her! Much as she despised him before, he sunk infinitely lower in her opinion now, and there was intense scorn in her tone, as she answered, "Thank you, Mr. Taylor. If you want to buy a wife, you have made a mistake in coming here!"

"You say no, then, do you? All right. You can have your brother's name branded as a cheat and swindler! You can know that wronged and ruined people are cursing his memory! His creditors have kept quiet up to this, because they hoped that there was a chance of their getting some money out of me. When they find out that I am not going to pay them, you will hear a little more about them, I can tell you. Just think the matter over quietly, Lestlie. I won't press you for an answer until to-morrow."

"You have had my answer, Mr. Taylor."

"I won't take it! I tell you I won't! Look here, Lestlie Wheeler; you are the only woman in the world I ever wished to marry, and marry you I will! I am one of those men who, when they are determined to do a thing, do it; and your no shall change into yes before long—I swear it!" Down on the table with a heavy bang came his clinched fist. "I swear it!" he said again, in tones that seemed to her to vibrate through the room.

Lestlie actually quailed before him, but only for a moment; and then a smile, half scornful, half derisive, came to her lips.

"Swear it as often as you please," she said; "it can make no difference whatever to me."

He crossed his arms over his chest, and looked savagely at her from under his heavy brows.

"What a devoted sister!" he sneered. "Don't you think it would be a good plan to rip the crape off your dress? 'Tis rather absurd your wearing it. If you have any nice feeling, you will be ashamed to show your face in Oceanville, or anywhere else, after to-morrow; for if you don't come to terms with me, people will have plenty to say about you and your brother."

"My brother's debts can be paid without your help," answered Lestlie; and before he had time to detain her she was gone.

He looked after her, and a muttered curse fell from his lips; but he laughed as he gathered up the bills and stuffed them into his pocketbook.

"Mrs. Russel will soon bring you to terms, Miss Lestlie," he said to himself. "Just wait until she has had a talk with you!" Then his brow darkened as he said, half aloud, "What did you mean by saying that those bills could be paid without my help?"

The dining-room door stood ajar, and as Lestlie passed through the hall she heard voices within.

"If he should find it out, mamma?" Laura said.

"Nonsense! how could he? Do you not think I can manage better than that?" her mother answered.

Lestlie heard distinctly, but she took no heed. Her mind was fully occupied with her thoughts, wondering what Luke would say when she told him the story of what had just happened, and whether he would think less highly of her for begging him to help her out of this difficulty.

CHAPTER IX.

IN SPIKE OF HERSELF.

AN answer to his letter already! Lestlie had not left him long in suspense, and with quickened pulse and eager haste Luke broke the seal and took the closely written-sheet out of its cover. He read it through—surprise, pain, perplexity on his face. He read it through a second time—a third. Its meaning came to him at last—a meaning which filled him with grief and dismay.

Courteously, but coldly, she thanked him for the honor which he had done her, but to give him her love was out of the question. She always looked on him as a friend, but now she feared that neither her friendship nor her respect could be his.

"How was it possible," she wrote, "that caring for me, you could deliberately set yourself to win the love of my cousin Laura, devoting yourself to her so constantly and publicly that you were gener-

ally supposed to be engaged, and that she herself was fully convinced that you loved her? If you have one spark of honor or manliness, you will make the only reparation in your power for the great wrong you have done her; for it will break her heart if she discovers your falseness. Until she met you, no one ever won from her so much as a passing fancy, and she is one of the few with whom to love once is to love forever. Of course she has not the faintest idea that I am writing this. I have betrayed her secret to you, hoping that you may follow the path which honor and conscience cannot but point out. I must beg that, no matter what line of action you adopt, you will never make any allusion to this letter either to her or to me. It pains me more than I can tell you to be forced to send it, and you must help me to forget it was ever written. What led you to suppose that I would give you a different answer, I cannot imagine; it is one of the many instances of how people (unconsciously, I trust) deceive themselves and others at the same time."

And so he was rejected—completely, unconditionally rejected; and not only that, but bidden to make another woman his wife!

Oh, what folly, what blindness had been his! And he could almost have taken his oath that there was love in the eyes with which Lestlie had looked so timidly into his the night before.

Why recall that now? Was not his humiliation bitter enough without dwelling on it any more? Love she could not give him; but her respect, at least, should not be forfeited. No one should say of him that he had made a toy of a woman's heart.

What he had to do must be done at once, or his courage and resolution might fail; and with a trembling hand he penned a note to Laura, asking her whether, if he came that evening to beg of her to intrust her life's happiness into his keeping, she would give him a patient hearing.

Evening came, and with it the wooer, whose face was grave and pale, and whose heart was aching with a bitter pain. He asked for Miss Russel. She was in the drawing-room, the servant told him, volunteering at the same time the information that Mrs. Russel and Miss Wheeler were out.

The room was dusk, for the blinds were nearly all drawn down, but out of the shadow Laura came quickly forward to meet him.

Involuntarily he drew back. Now that the ordeal had come, he would have given worlds to undo what he had so hastily done. She looked up at him, her face so surprised and pained that his heart smote him. There could be no receding now, and much less could there be any half measures.

He rested one hand on her shoulder; with the other he drew her gently toward him.

"Do you care for me, Laura?" he asked.

"Have I done right in coming to you?"

"Care for you! Oh, Luke, if you only knew how I do care!" And she let her head sink down on his shoulder, hiding her face there. "You have made me so happy!" she murmured. "I can hardly realize it yet. Lestlie told me weeks ago that she was certain you did like me. I could hardly believe her then, but I see now what a true prophet she was."

"Did I show my feelings so plainly?"

Laura clung closer to him; but she raised her head slightly.

"I don't know. I was afraid to trust to what I thought. I don't mind your knowing it now, but you made me love you almost from the very first time we met."

Made her love him! Yes, he had done that, and now he must pay the penalty.

"It was so hard to hide it from you all this time," Laura whispered; "and sometimes I used to be so miserable for fear—"

She did not finish the sentence; but her face went back again to its hiding-place.

"You have nothing to fear now, dear. The one wish of my life will be to try to make my wife happy."

"I know that, Luke—I know it!" she answered, as she suffered him to take the first kiss from her lips.

There were steps without, and Lestlie came into the room alone. Shyly Laura drew herself from Luke's embrace when she saw her.

Lestlie looked from one to the other, and

then her eyes fixed themselves in a blank, vacant gaze on Luke's face.

He came a step nearer to her, and bowed low.

"Wish me joy, Miss Wheeler. I am sure you will be glad to hear that Laura has consented to be my wife."

But Lestlie, instead of making any answer, turned and left the room as abruptly as she had entered.

"Will she give in, or will she not?" Harold Taylor asked himself, next morning, as he presented himself at Mrs. Russel's house. "Yes, I think she will," he concluded, when Lestlie appeared and he saw how pale and miserable her face was, and heard how her voice trembled when she spoke to him.

"Have you thought over what I said to you yesterday?" he asked.

"I have; and oh, Mr. Taylor, if you will only have pity on me, and pay those debts, I will be thankful to you all my life."

"And what else, Lestlie? That is not enough!"

"It must be; that is all I have to give."

"I will not take thankfulness only."

"Harold," she exclaimed, calling him by his name for the first time, "I will think of you, and love you like a brother, if you wish, but in mercy do not ask me for anything more. You do not know or understand, perhaps, but it would be worse than death to me to marry any one I did not love. I could not do it!—I could not do it! It would be misery for you, as well as for me. Indeed it would."

He watched her—a hard, cold smile on his face—and he said, coldly:

"One or the other it must be. When you give me the promise I want, those debts shall be paid, but not sooner. So take your choice."

"Tell me this, Mr. Taylor—why is it you want to marry me?"

He drew his hand across his brow; it was a thing he often did when talking to her, and as he touched the scar so plainly visible there, he smiled.

"Because I love you, I suppose," he said; "that is the reason a man generally gives to the woman he asks to be his wife."

"You do not love me!"

"Do I not? Shall I prove it?" And he made a quick movement toward her.

"No, no," she cried, springing back; "you shall not touch me—I cannot bear it! Ask me anything, tell me to say anything, only leave me my freedom."

"I have no wish to take it from you, unless with your own consent."

"Then Heaven help me! I can do no more."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"No!"

And before he knew what she was doing, she was kneeling beside him, begging, imploring, in words and tones that would have melted a heart of stone.

But all in vain; as well might she have entreated the waves not to come in any further on the soft, smooth sand, and have hoped that she, by tears and prayers, could move yon mass of primeval rock from where it towered over the beach.

"One or the other," he said, when she had ended. "Promise to marry me, or the debt remains unpaid."

She rose, and stood before him, and said, in slow, clear tones: "I hate you, I detest you, I despise you! I would rather handle the most loathsome reptile that ever crawled on the earth than touch you! You know now what I think of you, but if you want to marry me, you can. My brother's death lies at my door, but perhaps I may feel a little less remorse about him in future. Yes; for his sake I will marry you, but I will go on hating you more and more every day."

"I thought you would change your mind. Good!—I am quite satisfied," he answered, as calmly as though he had not heard one of her passionate, scornful words. "I will see about paying these bills to-day; and to-morrow we

can talk about when the wedding is to be. You will be a charming bride, Lestlie, and I am not going to wait long for you."

Suddenly and firmly his strong arms closed round her in a strain that no puny effort of hers could shake off. Once, twice, several times he kissed her. There was far more of the triumph of a conqueror than the passion of a lover in those kisses; but Lestlie felt nothing, and knew nothing, for she had fainted.

"Thirteen years are a long time, but this was worth waiting for!" he said to himself, as he looked down on the white unconscious face; but he did not kiss her again.

And so they were engaged—Laura and Luke Cennick, Lestlie and Harold Taylor. The news was soon told through all Oceanville, and, with a well-satisfied smile, Mrs. Russel received the congratulations of her friends.

Very well pleased indeed she was with the events of the last few days. That Laura should marry Luke had long been her cherished wish, and that wish seemed on the eve of accomplishment.

About Lestlie's future she would have concerned herself very little, had she not judged it necessary that she should be separated as effectually as possible from Luke; besides, Harold Taylor had made it well worth her while to lend him her assistance in working out his plans. Not only had she received five hundred dollars as the first installment of the money which he had offered to pay into her hands for Lestlie; but on the evening of the day which witnessed his engagement to his cousin he had given her another roll of notes of no inconsiderable value, which he looked on as very little more than sufficient payment for services rendered him.

She had used every argument to induce Lestlie to accept him. She had cheated her of her lover, to give him to her own daughter. And that was not all; but what else Mrs. Russel had done was a secret between her and Harold Taylor.

The contents of her cash-box had undoubtedly increased very much of late, and there was a prospect of another addition when mention of the purchase of Lestlie's trousseau would be made, which of course was to be paid for out of Harold's pocket.

Was it any wonder, then, that her manner to the young man was cordial and friendly in the extreme, or that she would now and then say to her niece, "Lestlie, pray try to look a little less like a suffering martyr? Everyone will believe that you are going to marry your cousin entirely on account of his money. I wonder how you can endure the thought of having such a thing said."

It was the case, that Lestlie was selling herself, but her pride revolted at the idea of its being known, or even suspected; and resolutely she forced her lips to smile, though her heart was breaking, determined to keep her miserable secret from the outside world.

She hated her betrothed husband, and he knew it perfectly well, but the knowledge did not seem to trouble him. She shuddered at his voice and touch, but he made no complaint. He made few attempts to claim a lover's rights, or even to speak of love when they were alone together; and in time she grew to prefer being alone with him, for in the presence of others he assumed the rôle of the devoted lover, having discovered that for the sake of appearances she must let him have his way.

"I can never understand why he wants to marry me!" she said once, to her aunt. "It certainly is not for love. Sometimes I cannot help thinking that he hates me."

And Mrs. Russel answered: "Do you suppose that there is nothing but love in the world, Lestlie? How many a man marries because he wants to place a suitable wife at the head of his establishment? And I think it very probable that, if you would only show him a little more affection, he would return it."

But though Mrs. Russel did not acknowledge

it to her niece, there were many things in Harold's conduct which she could not understand, and she often found herself pondering over the same question which puzzled Lestlie.

Those bright, fresh autumn days were utterly wretched to poor Lestlie; and to Luke Cennick they brought very little more happiness than to her. Sometimes, when he heard her gay laugh—never gayer than when he was by to hear, and which deceived him as completely as it did others—he could hardly restrain himself from demanding, in burning indignation, why it was that, having scorned his love, she had forced him to give its semblance to another woman?

"And she loves that clown—for his sake she refused me!" he would say to himself. "Or if she does not, it is wrong again—she is doing what no true woman could possibly do."

And then a white slender hand would timidly touch his arm, and Laura's voice would ask him why he was so silent and absent; and he would rouse himself to answer her with some tender, gentle words, wondering sadly how it was that he could not take back his love from one so unworthy of it, and give it where it would bring him so rich a return.

CHAPTER X.

REVENGE IS SWEET.

THE wind was fresh and the sky was clear, while the Faery Queen shot swiftly through the blue waters of the Atlantic. A brighter or more enjoyable afternoon for a sail could scarcely be found. The warm September sunshine fell on the sparkling sea, and on the white houses along the fast receding beach; flocks of sea-birds flitted like patches of cloud along the sky, swooping down on the water in search of prey; the cool briny breeze filled the canvas, bearing the little yacht straight as an arrow toward the misty horizon.

A glorious afternoon it undoubtedly was—one of the fairest that autumn had brought that year, or might bring again; and yet the clouds which had disappeared from the heavens seemed to have come down and settled thick and heavy on the little party assembled in the stern of the Faery Queen.

They were five in all—Mrs. Russel, her daughter, Lestlie, Luke Cennick, and Harold Taylor—bent on visiting Long Beach round at the other side of the promontory which bounded one side of Oceanville.

The men sailing the yacht had nothing to do just then, for a long tack was being made, and Luke, as usual, was steering. Old Ben Lockhart, who had been on many a voyage round the world, was spinning a long yarn about hair-breadth escapes from fire and shipwreck. Jack Marston, who had been to sea quite long enough in his younger days to understand how much, or rather how little, to believe of his stories, listened somewhat superciliously; while Hugh Parry, a fair-haired, sunburnt lad, was drinking in every word with eager interest.

The low, monotonous murmur of the old sailor's voice came down to the party in the stern; now and then only a word or two being faintly audible.

"I wish some one would tell us a story too—anything to pass the time," thought Luke Cennick, wearily, as over and over again the conversation would flag, and long periods of silence ensue. "I wonder what can be the matter with Lestlie. I don't think she has said one word since we started!"—and his eyes furtively searched out the girl's face for some sign of the growing discontent which of late he more than once fancied to have detected there.

So occupied were his thoughts with Lestlie, that he gave short, preoccupied replies to any remarks that Laura made to him; and Laura, feeling herself neglected and forgotten, before very long relapsed into sullen silence.

Harold seemed to find an examination of the charms dangling from his watch-chain a source of absorbing interest; he too, looked moody and out of sorts, so that Mrs. Russel was the only one who made any attempt to keep the conversation going.

She certainly did her duty bravely. She talked of the weather, the scenery, and the beauty of the view from the bay; she talked of books, of politics, even of the harvest prospects; but receiving little help or encouragement, she at last gave up the attempt, and sat gazing vacantly at the white line of foam which the yacht was leaving in its wake, and wondering how she could have been so foolish as to suppose that a party composed of such elements could be a pleasant or merry one.

And then, following up the same train of thought, she began to ask herself whether she could be perfectly sure that all would now go well—that no accidental circumstance would occur to upset all her plans and schemes. Until both Lestlie and Laura were both safely married, she would have a weight of anxiety on her mind, for the veriest trifle might serve to show either Lestlie or Luke Cennick that there had been trickery at work. And then—

She started, shivered, and drawing the shawl she wore more closely round her, said that the afternoon was growing decidedly chilly—that there was a great draught from the sails, and expressed a fervent hope that they might soon reach their destination.

Before very long a fresh tack was made, and they did reach it, greatly to every one's relief, except, perhaps, that of Hugh Parry, who would willingly have listened for hours to Ben's adventures.

At some little distance from shore the Faery Queen was moored, and the tiny punt let down.

"Only three and a man to row can go at a time," Luke said—"more than that would sink the punt too deep in the water. Mrs. Russel, may I help you in? Laura, will you go too?"

"Let Lestlie and Mr. Taylor come with me," Mrs. Russel answered; "you can follow with Laura."

That was all as it should be; yet as old Ben Lockhart watched his master's face he told himself, not for the first time that day, that there was something wrong.

Slowly enough the afternoon passed. Luncheon was spread on the strand, and later the beach was duly explored.

What a place for lovers those cliffs would have been, all incumbered with blocks of stone, among which such careful guidance was required! So thought Laura, with one of those sudden touches of romance which came to her now and then, as she wandered in and out at Luke Cennick's side, fully conscious that it was only by putting the utmost constraint upon himself that he did not show more plainly how little room she occupied in his heart. So thought Lestlie, as she shrunk in horror back from the touch of Harold's hand, held out so often to help her, and struggled to banish from her mind the remembrance of the love-dream which she had indulged in for a few short hours. So thought Mrs. Russel, as she patiently waited for the reappearance of those ill-matched couples, and hoped, that she would not have many more such intensely stupid days to spend.

Within a few hundred feet of the place where the excursionists had landed was a small whitewashed cottage, a poor-looking place enough, but very neat and clean, while the cap and apron of the old woman who, knitting in hand, was seated near the open door through which the slanting rays of the evening sun were streaming in, were spotlessly white.

Lying back in an old arm-chair, drawn close beside the fire which, notwithstanding the warmth of the afternoon, was burning brightly on the hearth, was a man pale, worn, and emaciated, looking like one who was recovering from a long illness, or who was sinking into the last stage of consumption.

"We'll have very bad weather before long," the old woman said, as all at once the sunshine vanished. "The clouds are coming up thick from the sea—we'll be having a storm soon, I'm thinking."

"I wish the storms would keep away," the

sick man said, fretfully. "'Tis all very well for you who can sleep through them, but 'tis weary work for me lying awake hour after hour, listening to the wind howling like a set of furies, to say nothing of the noise the waves make in that cove yonder."

Mrs. Rogers sighed. It was weary work for her tending her invalid son through those long, sleepless nights. She was nearly worn out by nursing, but she was not one to murmur or complain.

"There's the rain now," she said, presently; "and oh, Sam, here are a set of gentlefolks coming straight up to the cottage! They're the same as came round in the yacht this afternoon. It must be shelter now they're wanting."

With ready hospitality, she stood at the open door to receive her visitors, and bidding them a respectful good-morning, begged them to come in, and busied herself finding chairs for them all.

"You must excuse my son, ma'am," she said, as he did not move or speak, "but he's come home sick from foreign parts, just a fortnight ago now."

"Where have you been?" asked Mrs. Russel, graciously.

"To the diamond fields—worse luck that I ever went there!" Sam Rogers answered.

Then he looked round, but not at Mrs. Russel. It was on Harold Taylor's face that his eyes rested. Leaning his hands on the arms of the chair, he raised himself with an effort, and made a step or two toward him. Then, unequal to the exertion, he sunk back again, but not for one instant were his eyes removed.

"It is you," he said faintly; "yes, it must be you!"

"What do you mean, my good man?" Harold asked. "You seem to know me, but I have not the faintest recollection of ever having seen you before."

He spoke coolly and naturally, but not a doubt rested on the minds of any of his hearers that the recognition had been mutual.

"I can remind you of a few times we met,"—and a faint color rose on Rogers's pallid cheeks. "I dare say you won't thank me for it, but all the same I'm going to speak out. I meant to have looked you up, and paid you a visit before now, but I hadn't the strength. I promised it faithfully to one that is dead that I would."

"You lying villain, will you hold your tongue?" thundered Harold. "Look here, Mrs. Russel, there's hardly a drop of rain; let you and the girls hurry back to the yacht as fast as you can, before it gets worse. The wind is getting up, and you will have rather a rough sail of it if you don't make haste home. Cennick, can't you signal to send the punt? I will be across by the time the ladies get down to the shore. Don't mind me! This fellow is either mad or raving. I'll stop here, and see what I can do with him. There! make haste, can't you? You'll have a regular storm down on you, if you don't."

"I'm neither mad nor crazy," Rogers made answer; "and I think I know who that young lady in black is now. 'Tis many a time I've seen your likeness, Miss Lestlie. Your brother had it in a locket which he always wore, and he often let me take a look at it."

"You knew my brother, then?"

And in a moment Lestlie was bending over the sick man's chair, and looking eagerly into his face.

"Lestlie, I won't have this!" exclaimed Harold, roughly laying his strong hand on her shoulder, and trying to drag her away. "I tell you that man is the most arrant liar that ever existed! You shall not listen to one word more he says—I tell you you shall not!"

"She shall, Mr. Taylor, and so shall you," Rogers answered. "And what right have you to prevent her from hearing me, I should like to know?"

"The right that a man has over the woman who is to be his wife," answered Harold; "and the right that a man who has plenty of money

has over the man who has none," he added, in a whisper meant for Sam Rogers's ear alone. "Remember that!"

"I heard what you said!" cried Lestlie. "You are going to bribe him to keep silence. You never would do that if you were not afraid of him."

"You are talking nonsense, Lestlie! Is it I who am afraid?"

"Oh, very well; perhaps you are not. Then you must prove it by letting him say what he pleases. You can contradict him afterward if he does not speak the truth."

"Miss Wheeler is right," Luke Cennick said, decidedly. "This man shall have a fair hearing, Mr. Taylor. You need not be afraid of his maligning you, for your word is certainly as good as his."

"Who asked you to interfere?" asked Harold, angrily. "If you had one particle of common sense you would be thinking of hurrying back to Oceanville instead of running the risk of drowning nearly a hundred people."

"Not much danger of that, even if it does blow a little hard. The Faery Queen is tolerably seaworthy. Besides, we must wait until this shower is over. Only look how it rains!"

Harold muttered something which sounded like "Humbug!" and "Confounded impertinence!"

His brow was as black as a thunder-cloud; but he made no further objection.

"My best thanks to you, sir," said Rogers. "And oh, young lady, I would a thousand times rather see you in your coffin than married to that man! If your poor brother only—"

"It is of Mr. Wheeler, and not what you do or do not think, that my niece wants to hear," interrupted Mrs. Russel, who was beginning to feel far from comfortable respecting the result of Sam Rogers's disclosures.

Had it been in her power, she would have silenced him altogether; but knowing that was beyond her power, she thought it better not to interfere until it could be of real use.

"Yes; tell me about my brother. I do not want to hear anything else," Lestlie said, in a low, unsteady voice.

"Very well, miss. As the lady there says, 'tis not for me to make any remarks. I loved him with all my heart, Miss Lestlie. He was just as good as any brother to me, though I never seemed to forget that he was a gentleman and I was only a common man. I had been able to do a few good turns for him. He said he was thankful to me, and he showed it too. When I was down with fever, he nursed me through it; and then he took sick himself. Not one diamond of any value had either he or I found, and all the money was gone; for what might have got food and medicine for him he had spent on me. There was a man that came to see him a few times, and told him how he was his cousin, the son of a sister of his father's, and that man had been in rare luck. I thought I might ask him for a little help, and I did. I told him a few shillings might be the saving of poor Mr. Wheeler's life. He came with me to his hut. Your brother was lying in a corner, unable to move, a mug of water near him, for that was all I could get to give him to drink. And he stood and looked at him, and laughed—yes; on my soul, I am telling you the truth—and said that was how he liked to see him; that he had hated him for years, and that he had his revenge now. He died that night—murdered in cold blood, if any man ever was murdered!"

There was horror on the faces of all, doubt on that of none; and then Harold Taylor laughed—laughed as he had done when mocking the mute entreaty which he had read in Richard Wheeler's dying eyes.

"'Tis true—every word of it," he said, crossing his arms, and looking from one to the other. "I'm not going to deny it, and I suppose it would be of no use. You think me a fiend incarnate, I dare say; but I'll tell you why I did it. I just let him die as his

father let my mother die, when a little help might have saved her. I thought of her when I was looking at him, and how could I feel any pity? And, Lestlie, do you remember one summer's day just thirteen years ago you were in the wood by yourself, and you wanted to cross the stream, and a boy who saw you wanted to lift you over, but you screamed and stamped at him, and called him a common, vulgar boy; and your brother came up and said he was an insolent young scoundrel because he refused to take a handful of coppers he threw him; and then he fought with him, and flung him on the ground, and left him to live or die. I was that boy, Lestlie Wheeler! You can see the mark of the fall on my face to this very day; and I swore I would be revenged both for my mother and for myself. 'Tis a pity you found it all out so soon. If you had only been my wife first, I would have enjoyed telling you myself what you have just heard from that man there."

"Horrible!" Mrs. Russel exclaimed!

Harold Taylor turned on her with a sudden ferocity which startled every one in the room.

"This from you, Mrs. Russel?" he thundered out. "Oh, yes, of course! You, a fine aristocrat, the very essence of honor and truth, cannot expect to look upon my conduct as anything but horrible!"

She paled visibly, and her voice was unsteady and tremulous as she said to Luke Cennick, "Let us get away at once, if you please. This scene is becoming very painful."

"Ah, you are in a hurry to be off now!" Harold exclaimed. "You can go, if you please; but, Lestlie, let me give you a piece of advice first. Ask your aunt why she was so anxious for you to marry me, and how much money she had from me."

"Mr. Cennick, please—" commenced Mrs. Russel, trying to drown his voice.

But Luke pushed by her, and said, eagerly, to Harold. "What jugglery has there been going on here? What is this about your giving money to Mrs. Russel?"

"He never gave me any!" Mrs. Russel exclaimed. "Mr. Cennick, how can you believe one word from the lips of that dreadful man?"

Harold turned toward her again.

"If you had only kept quiet I would have said nothing about you. 'There's honor among thieves,' they say; but as you chose to throw a stone at me, I can throw one back at you. The character that was given me of you when I first came to Oceanville was that you would sell body and soul for gold, and the person who said that was not far out. You took five hundred dollars from 'that dreadful man,' as you were pleased just now to call me, the very second time I saw you."

"It was for Lestlie," Mrs. Russel said, faintly. "Mr. Taylor, I have been your friend from the very beginning. It is cruel—shamefully cruel of you to speak as you are doing!"

"Yes; you were my friend because I paid you well for it. Hush! Keep quiet! You are not going to prevent me from telling the bargain you and I made. You gave me a set of bills, which I showed Lestlie, telling her they were due by her brother, and promising to pay them if she would marry me. I gave you five hundred dollars more for those bills. You had a lot of trouble in preparing them, for they were forged, every one of them—yes, forged!"

He paused.

There was an intense, deathlike silence in the room, and then he continued: "Those bills were a great idea of Mrs. Russel's, and I think I humbled you pretty considerably by them, Miss Lestlie. That day I met you in the wood thirteen years ago you hardly expected that you would go down on your knees before that 'common, vulgar boy,' begging me to pay your brother's debts. I have had a large share of my revenge, but I have not done with you yet. It will take a little more than that to wipe off all the old scores, I can tell you. Good-by—for the present."

He ceased speaking, and strode out of the cottage.

Then Mrs. Russel stood up, and heaving a sigh of relief, said: "So he has really gone at last! I only hope I may never see him again. I tried to be kind to him, and this is the return he makes. It is terrible to think of his conduct toward poor Richard and Lestlie; and then that tissue of falsehoods he told about me! But, of course, none of you can dream of believing them for one moment. Lestlie, dear, I congratulate you with all my heart on your escape from such a monster!"

"I congratulate you, too, Miss Wheeler," Luke added; but not one word did he say about disbelieving Harold's statement.

"Mother!" Sam Rogers said.

She went over to him.

"Mother, where is the parcel I gave you to keep for me?"

"I will get it for you," and unlocking a press, she brought him a small parcel, carefully papered and sealed.

Lestlie glanced eagerly at it, but Laura's face grew very white. Up to this no mention of her name had been made in connection with Richard Wheeler. She had deemed herself safe—but what was coming now?

Sam Rogers slowly cut the string, broke the seals, and one wrapping of paper after another fell to the ground.

"He gave me this for you, Miss Lestlie," he said, holding up a small gold locket. "It was the only trinket he hadn't parted with. You should have had it sooner, but I've been too ill to look for you. He used to talk to me very often about you, miss—mostly on nights when he was lying awake; and he bid me tell you he had done the best for you, and it was not his fault he had failed."

"There, that will do," Lestlie said. "I will come and see you very soon again, and then—"

"I see, miss; with others by, one doesn't like to talk. But I've got another message to give. There was a lady he told me about once—only once—but he said he had loved her, and she him, and when he got poor they tried to make her give him up. But she kept true to him all the same, and used to send him such nice, loving letters. Here they are, all in this package. It was the last thing his hands did to tie them up. 'Tell her,' he said, 'that I loved her to the very last, and that I died thinking of her.' Her letters are all there, Miss Lestlie; he said he wanted her to see how he prized them. Will you give them to her? You must know her, and where she is. The name is written here on the outside; see, 'tis Miss Laura Russel."

Lestlie held out the package of letters to Laura, and in silence Laura held out her hand to receive it.

CHAPTER XI.

FOILED!

A ROUGH, heaving sea, the wind sweeping down in fierce gusts, and lashing its surface into sheets of foam; the gallant yacht plowing its way steadily through the waves, though every timber was creaking; the women sitting helplessly in the tiny cabin, the men on deck battling with the elements.

Scarcely had they rounded the promontory, when the gale caught them. To endeavor to make head against it would be sheer madness, and there was nothing for it but to endeavor to regain the shelter of the little bay which they had left some two hours before.

"We'll do it, master; we're all right!" exclaimed Ben Lockhart, joyfully. "But we must keep a sharp lookout we don't get on the rocks."

"There is no danger whatever; we are perfectly safe," Luke said, a short time later, as he made his way into the cabin. "But there is no chance of our being able to reach Oceanville to-night; we are putting back to Long Beach. I expect you will be able to get pretty good accommodation in the village."

The prospect was not a pleasing one, but no dissatisfaction was expressed. The yacht was in much smoother water now, the straining and pitching had ceased, and the feeling that they were once more in safety overcame every other consideration.

Luke had passed no remark on what had occurred in Mrs. Rogers's cottage. Since their return to the yacht he had been busily engaged on deck, but when they had finished discussing their plans for the night, he said, abruptly, "Miss Wheeler, will you come on deck with me for a moment or two? You can get no harm, and I want to ask you a few questions."

Mrs. Russel and Laura exchanged glances.

"That is rather a peculiar request, Mr. Cennick!" exclaimed the former. "If you have any questions to put to Lestlie, why not ask them here, or wait until another time?"

"I can do neither the one nor the other, Mrs. Russel. Give me your hand, Miss Wheeler; I will help you."

"I cannot permit such a thing!" Mrs. Russel cried, vehemently. "Lestlie shall not leave the cabin!"

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Russel, but she shall!"

And aided by his firm grasp and strong arm, the bewildered girl found herself mounting the wet, slippery cabin stairs, until she stood beside him close to the steersman.

"All right, Marston?" questioned Luke, shouting to make himself heard.

"All right, sir," was the reply. "We'll be in in half an hour."

"Now, Miss Lestlie," Luke said, turning to her and lowering his voice, "will you tell me, honestly, whether you knew of the engagement between Laura and your brother?"

"I did."

"And do you think she loved him?"

Lestlie hesitated.

"Please answer me."

"You have no right to ask me that, Mr. Cennick; question Laura, if you want to find out."

"You constituted yourself Laura's spokeswoman, when you gave me to understand that she cared for me."

"I? How?"

"How? As if you do not remember! In your letter you distinctly stated that such was the case."

"In my letter! I never wrote you any letter."

"Listen; what can this mean?—'In answer to my letter to you—'"

"Wait, Mr. Cennick; there must be some misunderstanding! I never got any letter from you!"

"Not one I wrote to you the day after I came back to Oceanville?"

"No. This is the first I heard of it."

"And you did not write to me?"

"No."

"Come below again, Lestlie. I must solve this mystery. Good Heavens! can this be another of that woman's villainies?"

Below, mother and daughter were awaiting their return, knowing only too well what they had to expect.

"Fool that you were to keep up a correspondence with that young beggar!"

"And, my dear mother, you were a far greater fool to write that letter you thought so marvelously clever. You can deny having had anything to do with those bills, but Luke will certainly discover the truth about it."

Those were the only words which passed between them.

Mrs. Russel drew back into the darkest corner of the cabin when Luke and Lestlie reappeared.

Laura, with an expression of mild surprise on her face, looked boldly up at them.

"Which of you two is the author of this?" asked Luke.

And in the thick yellow light of the cabin-lamp he held out an open letter,

"Mamma wrote it," Laura answered, promptly.

"Your mother?"

"Yes. I had nothing whatever to do with it."

"But you knew that she was writing it! You knew that my letter to Lestlie was never given to her!"

Laura made no answer.

A shock, a deafening crash, a dull, grating sound, a heaving to and fro, a sudden quiet and stillness save for the gurgling of the water around the yacht. She was on the rocks!

Yes; there she was, tightly wedged in, and the water was oozing in through the crushed, broken planks.

The deepening twilight was gathering quickly round them. The tide was rapidly rising. The water in the yacht grew deeper each minute, and the waves broke heavily against her side; and there was the danger that any moment she might be washed away from the rocks, either to be hurled on to them again, or, worse still, to fill and sink at once.

Along the distant shore there was the glimmer of many lights, but not a human being was near to lend a helping hand.

There was one chance of escape, and only one. To endeavor to reach land in the little punt, which was safe and uninjured.

Luke looked at the punt, and then at the number of people who had to trust to it for safety.

"We cannot all go together," he said; "four are the very most that can venture in such a sea. Four—the three ladies, and one of the men to row."

"One man could never do it, sir," replied Ben Lockhart, decidedly, "'tis two miles and more to the nearest landing-place. 'Twould set two about their best. There's a current here that 'tis no child's play to pull against."

"Then two must go now, and one must wait."

"What, wait here to be drowned?" cried Mrs. Russel. "And 'tis all Lestlie's fault. If she had not insisted in delaying so long talking to that horridman, we would have been safely home long ago. We shall all be drowned, and it will be all her fault."

"Hush, if you please; this is no moment for reproaches," Luke said, sternly, almost contemptuously. "Your safety shall be taken care of; and who else is to go?"

"Laura must come! I insist on Laura's coming! I will not leave her to be drowned!"

"Is it to be Laura, then?" asked Luke.

Laura said nothing, but she passed her arm through her mother's, as though to show that she was determined to keep with her.

"I will wait; the punt can be sent back for me," Lestlie said, quietly.

"Then let us make haste, mamma," exclaimed Laura. "You heard what Lestlie said; she does not mind waiting. She was never nervous, you know."

"You are a brave, noble girl, Lestlie," whispered Luke. Then he turned to the men.

"Which of you will stay here with me and Miss Wheeler?" he cried.

"I will, sir!" "No, I will!" "No, let me stay, sir!" cried all three in chorus.

Then Ben Lockhart spoke again; "Jack Marston has got a wife and children ashore; Hugh has his old father and mother. I've got no one, sir. You'll let me bide here, won't you?"

"Yes, Ben, I'll keep you. Marston, you and Hugh must take charge of these ladies, and then one of you come back to fetch us off as soon as ever you can."

In utter amazement, Laura listened.

"Luke, you are not going to stay here? You surely cannot dream of doing such a thing?" she said.

"I intend to be the last to quit the yacht. And do you think I would go and leave Miss Wheeler behind?"

"She would have the men. Luke, I will not go without you."

And leaving her mother's side, she wound her arms round his neck.

With a quick movement he put her from him.

"The men are waiting for you, Miss Russell," he said, coldly. "I thought you would have spared me the pain of telling you that henceforth you and I can be nothing whatever to each other. I will help you into the punt."

CHAPTER XII.

SO LONG AS LIFE LASTS.

THE last splash of the oars had died away before Luke spoke again to Lestlie.

Trembling from head to foot, but not with fear, she leaned over the side of the yacht, not cold and shivering, but forgetting all in the knowledge that the one being in the world whom she loved was near her, and that she was sharing his danger.

She heard him talking to Ben Lockhart, but had not the faintest idea of what he was saying.

And then he came up to her.

"Lestlie," he said, "let me wrap this round you; you must be very cold,"—and he wrapped a thick woolen shawl about her.

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

"Oh, no!"

"You were very brave just now, Lestlie. Did you not feel to want to go in the boat?"

"No," she answered, simply; "if either of them had stayed and anything had happened, I would have felt like a murderess. But I wish you had gone with them."

"Then you would rather not have me here?"

"I did not mean that."

"Lestlie, do you remember the letters that we were talking about when the yacht struck?"

"Yes; but I can't quite understand."

"Do you remember the evening that I asked you whether you were going to marry Mr. Taylor, and what you told me?"

"I do."

"That very evening I wrote to you, Lestlie. I wrote to ask you if you would be my wife. I sent the letter next morning, and I was almost certain that I would have the answer I wanted. But the answer was that you never could love me; that I had won Laura's heart; and that, if I had one spark of honor, I would marry her. The letter was in your writing, Lestlie, and your name was signed to it; and I thought that I was doing your bidding, and redeeming my lost honor, when I proposed to Laura."

He bent closer over her, and she felt his breath on her cheek as he asked, "Lestlie, what answer would you have given me if that letter had reached you?"

Her answer was soft and low-spoken, but it sufficed him.

The water crept up higher along the sides of the yacht, and the darkness deepened around them; the frail planks, which alone parted them from sudden death, trembled and shook at each dash of the angry waves; but they thought of none of these things in their newfound, passionate joy. Past, present, and future were all as completely forgotten as though such things had no existence whatever for them.

Ben Lockhart's voice suddenly roused them.

"The punt's gone a long time, sir," he said. "We ought soon to be seeing it come back now."

Luke took out his watch, and looking at it, wondered how the time had passed.

"Yes; it may be here any minute," he answered. "Hark! what is that?"

They listened.

It was the sound of oars; and then over the water there sounded a long, loud shout.

Right joyfully they answered, and then the boat came within reach of the lights hung up as signals to the masts of the yacht.

"Which of them is it? It doesn't look like either, somehow," said Ben, peering out from under his shaggy eyebrows.

The rower rested on his oars, and turned round.

The light fell full on his face, and they saw that it was neither of their own men, but Harold Taylor.

He waited until he was perfectly sure that they had recognized him, and then the oars struck the water once more—not to bring him nearer.

Like an arrow the punt shot by them, and vanished into the darkness.

Such was his vengeance—complete at last!

As he had left the brother to die, even so had he abandoned the sister to her fate.

Of what use were the frantic cries which Ben Lockhart sent after him?

If he had heard them he would only laugh, and nothing more.

He had left them to die, and death was very near. The water was closing round them—every now and then a wave would come washing over the deck. The time that they had got to live was counted by hours, perhaps; perhaps by minutes only.

"That he may never see the morning dawn himself, fiend that he is!" That was the last of a torrent of invectives and curses which Ben, in his first rage and despair, poured out on him; and then the old man's stoical courage regained the upper hand, and he strove to make his companions feel a hope that was dead in his own heart. "The timbers may hold together till dawn," he said, "or they may send out another boat when they find we're not coming back; and if the worst comes to the worst—well, we've all got to die some time, and a little sooner or later can't make so much account."

"Lestlie, darling, are you afraid?"

With a far deeper, far more terrible meaning than before, he put the question to her now.

She looked down at the cold, hungry, seething waters, which so soon would engulf them, and she answered, "Promise to hold me tight, very tight, all the time, Luke, and then I don't think I'll mind."

He drew her closer to him, and held her head down on his shoulder.

"My poor darling!" he murmured, with sad, passionate tenderness. "And I would have made your life so bright, so happy!"

"I know you would, Luke. This morning, when we were passing by this very place, I kept thinking what a mercy it would be if I could throw myself into the water and die at once. I was so wretched then; but now—oh, now!"

"Don't think of that, Lestlie; remember that we are to be together to the last!"

"That must make it easier," she answered; and then she looked round at Ben Lockhart.

"Let me go," she whispered to Luke; and slipping away from his arms, she went up to the old sailor. "Ben," she said gently, "I wish I could tell you how sorry I feel for having brought you to this."

"There, you mustn't trouble about me at all, miss," he said, almost gruffly. "I've lived through well-nigh seventy years, and I've had about enough of life. But"—and he shuddered slightly—"I wish the end had come a little quicker. I'd go through anything almost rather than have to wait like this."

"Poor Ben!" Lestlie said, taking his rough hand between hers; "we must wait as patiently as we can."

"Yes, miss, we must," he answered, huskily. "But," he added, as though speaking to himself, "they can wait together; I've got to wait alone."

The cold, quiet, leaden hue of early dawn crept over the sky, and as the sun was rising out of the still troubled sea, a schooner that had been buffeting all night with wind and waves made its way into port, slowly and unsteadily, with broken masts and tattered canvas.

With rough but tender care some of the crew were tending two fellow-creatures whom

they had rescued, as it were, from the very jaws of death; but when Lestlie Wheeler opened her heavy, weary eyes, they wandered from Luke's face, which was eagerly bending over her, to a form wrapped in a fragment of sail, bearing that ghastly resemblance to humanity so fearful to behold; and when, consciousness having fully returned, she asked where Ben Lockhart was, she learned that he was the victim which the sea had claimed that night.

Of Harold Taylor no tidings were ever again heard.

Jack Marston and Hugh Parry told how he had joined them, just as Hugh was about to put back again in the punt to the yacht, and insisted on going in his place. Suspecting no treachery, and glad to give up the oars to strong, untired arms, he had let him have his way.

He and his wealth had alike vanished. No deeds or papers of any kind could be found even to testify to its existence. The general belief was that only one or two of his diamonds had been disposed of and the rest were in a case which he always carried about his person.

Whether he was picked up by some passing ship, or whether he met his deserts by finding a watery grave, must remain a mystery which can only be solved on that day when the sea gives up its dead.

A white marble tombstone in a little graveyard, the walls of which are often washed by the ocean spray, marks the spot where Ben Lockhart is buried.

At the beginning of each returning spring the snowdrops planted there by Lestlie's hand come up and blossom, and the regret felt for him is none the less sincere because she and Luke date the beginning of their happiness from the night on which the Faery Queen was wrecked.

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